

A QUEER GENEALOGY OF *HAVRUTA*:
STUDY PARTNERSHIP
AS INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEN
IN JEWISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation traces a literary lineage in Jewish cultural imaginations that associates *havruta*—an educational method of long-term study partnership that has evolved in a male homosocial context of traditional Judaism as a central pedagogical method and an important religious practice—with forms of same-sex erotic and affective connections, often analogous to marriage. This dissertation argues that the trope of queer *havruta*, which refers to literary images of traditional Jewish study pairs that can be read as queer through a modern lens, has established its place in the canon of queer romance and contributed to the shaping of Jewish queer culture.

Traditional Jewish sources, from the rabbinic period onward, often depict male study partnerships as sites of intimacy, personal attachment, and commitment, sometimes including erotic desire or sexual practices. The homoerotic potential of these representations is rooted in cultural assumptions distinct from modern sexual categories. The images of *havruta* intimacy in the Mishnah, Talmudim, and Midrash, along with their interpretive traditions, draw on biblical heroic couples and construct homoerotic intellectualism as a form of masculinity within ancient homosocial and patriarchal contexts.

Jewish writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—including S. An-sky, S.Y. Agnon, I.B. Singer, Tony Kushner, Jyl Lynn Felman, Michael Lowenthal, Evan Fallenberg, and others—re-articulate this literary tradition of homoerotic scholarship and *havruta* intimacy in ways that both align with and challenge modern gender and sexual categories. These modern and contemporary narratives seek and resist the signification of *havruta* intimacy, offering new pleasures, relational models, and ways to conceptualize male-male desire through affective and eroticized readings of Jewish history and intellectual life.

Reimagining *havruta* through a queer literary genealogy enables the reclamation and transformation of traditional Jewish symbols, often by challenging their heteronormative, sexist, and misogynistic assumptions, while reshaping religious, gender, and sexual identities, relationships, and intimacies. It disrupts binary and totalizing definitions of normativity and queerness by representing *havruta* intimacy as an intersection of multiple viewpoints and sensibilities, when some forms of traditional Jewish normativity produce enabling dynamics for new queer intimacies. It allows the creation of a distinctly Jewish queer space.

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SOURCES, ABBREVIATIONS, AND CONVENTIONS

Citations of the original biblical and rabbinic sources are from Sefaria.org, using the following manuscripts: for biblical sources, Leningrad Codex (1008 CE); for the Babylonian Talmud, the Vilna edition (Vilna: The Widow and Brothers Romm, 1880-86); for the Jerusalem Talmud, Leiden Manuscript, Venice Edition (Venice: Bomberg, 1523); for Mishnah, Kaufmann Manuscript (tenth or eleventh century) and Munich Manuscript (1342); for Tosefta, Erfurt Manuscript and Vienna Manuscript. Variant readings are discussed when a philological point is at stake.

Translations of biblical passages are from the New Jewish Publication Society translation (NJPS) or my own when indicated. Translations of rabbinic sources are from Adin Steinsaltz's translation of the Talmud (The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud) or my own when indicated.

This dissertation uses phonetic transliteration and a general-purpose style for transcriptions of Hebrew, Aramaic, and other ancient Near Eastern words, including names (e.g., Lakish or Yohanan), except words that have conventional English spelling (e.g., Jonathan).

Abbreviations for books of the Hebrew Bible follow MLA guidelines. Citations from rabbinic texts are according to SBL style guidelines: m. for Mishnah; t. for Tosefta; y. for Palestinian Talmud (Yerushalmi); b. for Babylonian Talmud (Bavli).

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Context: *Havruta*¹ in Jewish Queer Life and Culture

The images of traditional Jewish learning play a significant role in shaping today's Jewish LGBTQ culture. Indicatively, the word *Havruta* was selected as the name for an organization of Orthodox Jewish gay men in Israel to represent “a place to be together, a community” (“History of *Havruta*,” *Havruta.org.il*). Building on the notion of togetherness embedded in the traditional concept of *havruta*, the founders of this organization demonstrate the community-making power of *havruta* for gay Jews. Discussions of homoeroticism of *havruta* learning in the yeshiva or similar spaces can be found in the writings of Jewish gay and queer writers and activists in the new millennium, such as Steven Greenberg and Jay Michaelson, or Jewish LGBTQ websites such as *Orthogays.com*. The images of *havruta* as a site of Jewish gay or queer experience are increasingly represented in film, visual and performing art, and social media.

In continuation of the traditional androcentrism of *havruta*, these images of *havruta* in today's Jewish LGBTQ culture predominantly represent Jewish men (cis or, to a lesser degree, trans), with significantly less attention to women's experience. Since the beginning of the rabbinic movement in late antiquity, the patriarchal exclusion of women from intellectual life and from the central, the most valued activity of Jewish religious life—Torah² study—served to maintain

¹ In this dissertation, I follow the standard Modern Hebrew spelling “*havruta*,” which is recorded, for example, in the *Comey & Tsur Hebrew-English Dictionary* and in the *Even-Shoshan Hebrew Dictionary*. In citations from primary or secondary sources, I follow the authors' spelling, which can prefer an alternative form, such as *hevruta* or *hevrusa*.

² Here and hereinafter the “Torah” is defined in a broad sense as the Jewish religious texts that are the subject of studying in traditional Jewish educational settings (as opposed to a narrow meaning of the term “Torah” as referring to the Pentateuch or to the Hebrew Bible as a whole).

male dominance, reflecting the conceptual connection drawn by the ancient rabbis between “the dominant male role in sexuality and study of Torah” (Biale 36).³ This misogynistic foundation of the male homosocial homoeroticism of *havruta* remains a major problem for modern queer reclamation of this homoeroticism, as this dissertation demonstrates.

Arguably, Barbara Streisand’s film *Yentl* (1983) was the first cinematic representation of *havruta*. It represented the male homosociality of the traditional yeshiva from the angle of female experience and (heterosexual) sexual desire. Sandi Simcha DuBowski’s documentary *Trembling Before G-d* (the USA, 2001) and Haim Tabakman’s film *Eyes Wide Open* (*Einayim Pekuhot*, Israel, 2009) include scenes of *havruta* in comparison and contrast to the more focal matters of gay desire. Gay *havruta* is more prominently represented in Israeli short films *And Thou Shalt Love* (*V’ahavta*), directed by Chaim Elbaum in 2007, and *Barely in Love* (*Le’ehov bekoshi*), directed by Nadav Mishali in 2013. Both films represent the images of what Padvá calls “infatuated yeshiva boys in the new Israeli religious queer cinema” (421). In these films, the sexual or romantic desire and love relationships between Orthodox Jewish men are organized around their *havruta* studies in the homosocial environment of the yeshiva. For instance, in Elbaum’s film *And Thou Shalt Love*, men express intimacy, passion, and affection for each other through “typical boisterous debates on scriptural issues, singing and dancing together, holding hands, putting their arms around each other’s shoulders, and bathing together in the mikveh,” the normative social practices of the yeshiva that the gay filmmaker rereads as erotic manifestations, “intimate rituals of bonding and desire” (Padvá 429). The homoeroticism of *havruta* is also represented in *Shtisel*, an Israeli television drama series about the life of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in

³ Boyarin points out that some Palestinian rabbinic traditions (e.g., t.Berakhot 2.12) allowed women to study Torah (*Carnal* 180-181).

Israel, created by Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky and directed by Alon Zingman, which was aired in 2013-2021 and gained wide international popularity on Netflix.

Benyamin Reich's photograph *Chasid in Love* (2018) suggests sexual and romantic interaction between two male yeshiva students covered by one prayer shawl, *tallit*. Reich's photograph conveys the erotic intimacy of *havruta* where the prayer and Torah study, which traditionally represent erotic and romantic intimacy with God, become new forms of intimacy with a fellow worshipper and study partner. Tobaron Waxman's *Self-portrait as pshat*⁴ (2001) represents the artist's Torah study in *havruta* with Rabbi Justin Lewis as an artistic self-identification with the biblical text as a trans man's body. Waxman's images-performances of "the ongoing process of Torah study as art practice and queer locution" (125) merge the reader's body, the text, and the process of studying into a single whole, through articulating the process of Torah study as writing one's Hebrew names, male and female, out and into the text of the Torah. Memes posted in 2015 in a Jewish queer blog *Kinder the Yeshivish Tinder* represent male homoerotic desire through the traditional yeshiva language, such as "Hey boy, I can show you the yeshiva shel maaleh"⁵ or "Hey boy, being with you would never be bittul zman."⁶ These memes suggest that intimate interaction between Jewish men can be integral part of their Torah study. They portray yeshiva students who, instead of the traditional erotic metaphors of the

⁴ The title of Waxman's work, *Self-portrait as Pshat*, refers to a technical term of traditional Jewish biblical exegesis, the plain meaning of the text, *peshat*, as opposed to a derived, or applied meaning, *derash*, and to the method aimed to explicate this meaning.

⁵ The rabbinic term *yeshivah shel ma'alah* ("the yeshiva of Heaven," lit. "the yeshiva above") refers to the notion of heavenly academy that was thought to correspond to the ancient rabbinic academies on earth. See my discussion of this rabbinic concept later in this dissertation.

⁶ The phrase *bittul zman* (Hebrew "waste of time") is a technical term in the yeshiva world that denotes distractions from the goal of learning and thus a transgression of the commandment of Torah study, the highest religious obligation of a Jewish man.

intellectual pleasures of Torah study, express their gay sexual desire in traditional religious terms of Jewish learning.

These few examples show a specific trope that is present in contemporary Jewish LGBTQ culture and that invites an inquiry into its functions and effects—an inquiry that has not received a significant attention in critical scholarship. This dissertation asks why, how, and to what end this trope shapes Jewish cultural imaginations and representations of Jewish male same-sex experience, focusing on literary texts across historical periods.

1.2 The Flow of the Argument and Prospectus: The Literary Genealogy of Queer *Havruta* and Its Cultural Effects

In *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910), Sigmund Freud discusses his concept of epistemophilia, a desire for knowledge as sublimation of sexual curiosity. According to Freud, epistemophilia is fundamental to all childhood sexual development, yet he chooses the case of Leonardo, “an ‘epistemophilic’ child” (77) that represents a queer version of it. Freud interprets Leonardo’s focus on intellectual and artistic pursuits as sublimation of his homosexual energy: “This epistemophilic instinct, this thirst for knowledge, was in Leonardo’s case not simply an intellectual curiosity but a deeply rooted libidinal drive” (78). This dissertation is not on Freud or Leonardo, nor does it employ psychoanalysis as its methodology. It locates the connection between intellectual pursuits and homoerotic desire or queerness, which was noted by Freud within his psychoanalytic study of Western cultural tradition, in the context of Jewish culture. It argues that this epistemophilic tradition, which, to a great extent, manifests itself in the concept of *havruta*, long-term study pair, is fundamental for Jewish cultural imaginations since late antiquity and is central to the self-understanding of today’s Jewish LGBTQ writers—not necessarily as sublimation but rather as realization of certain cultural sensibilities.

This dissertation explores the relationship between traditional Jewish study practices and Jewish queer existence today by looking at instances of subversive performance of Jewish learning in classical and contemporary literary works. The Jewish epistemophilic tradition discussed in this dissertation disrupts binary and totalizing definitions of normativity and queerness. It points to the moments where they vary, overlap, or shift, depending on individual sensibilities and subjectivities. This dissertation demonstrates that some forms of traditional Jewish normativity produce enabling dynamics for new queer intimacies.

The Jewish model of long-term study pair, which is in the modern era commonly referred to as *havruta*, is a practice that is at once pedagogical and ritual, hermeneutical and gendered, religious⁷ and cultural, intellectual and affective. Within the context of traditional Jewish learning, it is a central site of shaping, performing, and disrupting religious, ethnocultural, gender, and sexual identities. When reimaged through a queer lens, how does the relational nature of *havruta* transform traditional religious symbols? How does it help rediscover, reshape, or reconstruct relationships and intimacies? This dissertation looks at selected texts in two bodies of literature: (a) ancient Judaic literature⁸ comprised of biblical and rabbinic traditions⁹ produced approximately between the seventh and fifth centuries BCE and between the second and seventh

⁷ This dissertation approaches *havruta* as a religious practice, fulfilment of the religious obligation (*mitzvah*) of Torah study that constituted the rabbinic notion of religious piety. This dissertation generally leaves aside theology and its concerns about relationship with God. The latter inevitably enters the discourse through the rabbinic understanding of Torah study, along with other Jewish practices, as God's commandment, a form of worship and devotion, a way to do God's will and to get closer to God, as well as the traditional view of the Torah as God's word and sometimes as a physical representation of the divine (e.g., "God's daughter"). Nevertheless, arguably, traditional Judaism privileges practice over beliefs. Hence, while the focus of this dissertation is not theological, recognizing the religious meanings and value of *havruta* is important for my argument.

⁸ The term used by Howard I. Schwartz (formerly Howard Eilberg-Schwartz) (132). While this dissertation accounts for the significant differences between biblical and rabbinic cultures (and between different layers within each of them), for the purposes of my argument, it is also helpful to see the cultural assumptions that the biblical and the rabbinic texts shared.

⁹ "A tradition" in relation to biblical and rabbinic texts ("a biblical tradition" or "a rabbinic tradition") is a specialized term that refers to a specific motif or stance on certain issues that may differ from other positions ("traditions") within the same corpus of literature.

centuries CE respectively and (b) Jewish queer literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My discussion of ancient Judaic literature is centered on the texts that are foundational for modern queer *havruta* narratives (such as the biblical legend of David and Jonathan or the talmudic tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish) or that provide literary and cultural contexts for the homoerotic understanding of Torah study (such as the dicta in Avot and Avot de Rabbi Nathan or midrashim on the Song of Songs). My choice of the literary works produced in the modern (early to mid-twentieth century) and contemporary (the turn of the new millennium) periods is determined by references to male same-sex desires and experiences in a context of shared Torah study. This dissertation suggests that the trope of homoerotic study partnership (whether this homoeroticism was intended by the ancient authors or perceived as such from a modern perspective) emerged in rabbinic literature of late antiquity (in the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash) within male homosocial structures of Torah study, and it has been transformed into a same-sex family model alternative to heteronormative marriage or a queer intimate space that allows new affective relations and pleasures in Jewish queer fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, for example, in the works of S. An-sky, I. B. Singer, S. Y. Agnon, Jyl Lynn Felman, Maggie Anton, K. David Brody, Michael Lowenthal, and Evan Fallenberg. The traditional Jewish sources recurrently show a homoerotic potential of study partnership—a homoeroticism that is rooted in the cultural assumptions that differ from modern sexual categories. The queer narratives of *havruta* in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries reclaim these lost or failed same-sex intimacies for new forms of Jewish queer experience. This dissertation argues that through the continued iterations of this imagined realization of the homoerotic potential of study partnership, and due to its centrality to the development of Judaism through the male homosocial study experience, the trope of queer *havruta* has contributed to

shaping today's Jewish queer culture and it has established its place in the canon of queer romance.

This dissertation identifies several cultural effects of the queer narratives of *havruta*. It suggests that as a space of intimate relationship with Jewish religious texts and with other readers of these texts *havruta* assumes a central role in the process of reclamation and (dis)identification with mainstream Jewish images in today's Jewish queer culture. The trope of queer *havruta* counters the binary, antagonistic notion of the relationship between Jewish tradition and queer culture, which is the dominant narrative in contemporary traditionalist Judaism. This trope makes same-sex relationships culturally intelligible for mainstream Jewish communities. Moreover, this trope opens new possibilities of Jewish queer existence and self-fashioning. The association of same-sex desire with the study of Jewish classical texts, which serve as a shared fetish in queer erotic performances, places this desire at the very heart of Jewish religion and culture and makes Jewish queer culture distinctive. The trope of queer *havruta* also constructs a distinctive type of the Jewish male queer self that resists the culturally available models of Jewish and gay identities. The dissertation further delves into the implications of traditional Jewish homosociality and masculinity constructions. It argues that while the traditional representations of male homosocial relations, which are products and producers of misogynistic and heteronormative (or potentially homonormative) structures, can be problematic from modern feminist and queer perspectives, these representations, if resignified, also possess the potential to be expanded and applied in contemporary queer contexts that include a variety of gender and sexual performances. This dissertation proposes that the difference of the homosocial intimacy between men in the *havruta* narratives stems from its simultaneous normativity and queerness. Due to these double representations, the *havruta*

narratives disrupt dominant modern sexual categories and easy definitions of sexuality by resisting signification and by pointing to a dynamic in which multiple viewpoints and sensibilities, normative and queer, intersect. By doing so, the queer images of *havruta* allow access to new affective relations and pleasures. This dissertation shows two major ways of representing study partnership as a mode of queerness. The first move is reclaiming and subverting non-genital homoeroticism of Jewish learning as a queer practice. The second move comprises images of same-sex intimacy as Jewish practice, as affective and sexual performances of Jewish hermeneutical traditions. While these moves require queer identifications with the traditional images, an affective, intimate reading of the traditional texts and structures also requires a (dis)identification with these traditional images, given their oppressive contexts and their damaging effects. In this sense, there is a fundamental discontinuity between a contemporary queer erotic and a past homosocial erotic, yet precisely this rupture points to queer effects of the normative *havruta* intimacies.

Chapter Two, “*Havruta* as a Queer Cultural Trope,” sets the terms and provides the context for the discussion of queer *havruta* narratives, addressing the question of what makes queer reclamations of traditional Jewish images of shared Torah study possible. The notion of Jewish-queer binary, which often informs conversations about Jewish homoeroticism or same-sex sexualities in academia and synagogue alike, especially when associated with specific biblical traditions such as the Levitical law and the legend of David and Jonathan, determines some of the cultural effects of the trope of queer *havruta*, in particular, the need to resist Jewish homophobic discourses on the one hand and, on the other hand, the limits of the *havruta* erotics that often divide between the normative homosocial eroticism and transgressive sexuality. Traditional homosocial homoeroticism, which provides the context for the relationality of

havruta, and queer experience are generally distinct categories, yet sometimes they overlap, as evident in Jewish literature and popular imaginations from late antiquity through the turn of the new millennium.

Chapter Three, “Homoerotic Images of Torah Scholars and Study Partnership in Rabbinic Literature,” examines the homoeroticism of rabbinic study partnership and places it in its cultural contexts. It explores the rabbinic constructions of homoeroticized intellectualism and scholarly masculinity within the male homosocial structures of Torah study through the rabbinic marriage metaphor and the notion of normative intimacy between scholars. The chapter suggests that the ancient rabbis established a literary pattern of homoeroticizing the scholar, the Torah, and learning through reworkings of Greco-Roman models of masculinity, pedagogy, friendship, and philosophers’ self-fashioning, as well as the biblical motif of heroic couple in the legend of David and Jonathan as part of the larger trope of homoerotic heroic friendship common in the ancient Mediterranean literatures. These literary reworkings are evident in the tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in the final story of the Rabbi Yohanan cycle in b.Bava Metsia 84a, which is generally viewed as the paradigmatic study pair and which can serve as the model for intimate and eroticized study partnership.

Chapter Four, “Reclaiming *Havruta* Intimacy in Modern and Contemporary Jewish Fiction,” discusses how the homoerotic potential within traditional study partnerships, tied to Jewish intellectual development, is revisited in modern and contemporary narratives, which attempt to uncover affective and erotic possibilities perceived as lost by reclaiming and reshaping Jewish queer experiences and identities. This chapter examines the queer effects and limits of the reclamation of the normative *havruta* intimacies through continuities and ruptures between a contemporary queer erotic and a traditional homosocial erotic. It demonstrates the ways Jewish

writers within the past hundred years employ and expand the traditional homoerotic imagery of *havruta* intimacy and reimagine study partnership as a queer space that allows access to new affective relations and different sexual pleasures, (dis)identifications with biblical and rabbinic purportedly homoerotic images, and alternatives to normative Jewish family structures. This chapter identifies a shift in *havruta* narratives in the twentieth century from nostalgic homoeroticism in the works of S. An-sky, Jiří Mordechai Langer, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon to openly disrupting conventional gender and marital structures in Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories. In its turn, Jewish fiction of the turn of the new millennium shows various forms of the imagined realizations of *havruta* queerness, from subverting traditional symbols of Jewish marriage by K. David Brody to imagining new sexual pleasures by Michael Lowenthal or Evan Fallenberg, to the search for new categories and spaces by Jyl Lynn Felman and Maggie Anton. This chapter examines a variety of ways that enable or restrict the representations of *havruta* as queer in contemporary literature.

Hence, by the end of this dissertation, I will have demonstrated the construction of study partnership as a distinct model of same-sex relationship in Jewish literature through a case study of traditional and modern-contemporary *havruta* narratives and their cultural effects. This dissertation can help better understand one of the major literary traditions that shape Jewish queer culture yet has not received substantial attention in critical scholarship. This research can suggest new perspectives on the intersections of religion, sexuality, gender, and secularity. This dissertation explores how “a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now” (Dinshaw 1) contributes to self- and community building in Jewish cultural settings.

1.3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework: The Interdisciplinarity of Jewish Queer Studies

Havruta has been typically analyzed as a pedagogical tool or as a religious practice, but not as an affective or erotic space. The existing critical scholarship in the field of Jewish education emphasizes the relational nature of *havruta* as a long-term committed close relationship between study partners. These works (for example, by Elie Holzer and Orit Kent) point to personal commitment and a sense of partnership as the fundamental features of *havruta* that distinguish this model from other pedagogical methods. Little or no attention, however, has been paid to the queer affects of *havruta* relationality and to the close connection of the relational foundation of *havruta* to the larger homosocial and homoerotic structures of traditional Jewish life. In the field of rabbinics, there has been no comprehensive research of rabbinic homoeroticism that would parallel the studies of biblical homoeroticism (such as the works of Martti Nissinen or Theodore Jennings). The works that pay attention to the homoeroticism of rabbinic literature (for example, by Daniel Boyarin, Michael Satlow, Jeffrey Rubenstein, or Max Strassfeld) do so briefly as part of larger discussions of rabbinic culture, sexual discourses, or gender. Examining the traditional Jewish concept of long-term study partnership, which is today termed *havruta*, in a queer context is a desideratum in rabbinics studies (Daniel Boyarin, e-mail note to the author, June 29, 2012). In the field of modern Jewish literature, there are works that examine queer content in modern Jewish texts (such as the works of Warren Hoffman, Naomi Seidman, or Zohar Weiman-Kelman), yet there is little research on the ways these texts relate to earlier literary traditions in a queer context. This dissertation brings *havruta* into the orbit of Jewish queer studies, a field that includes a growing body of research on Jewish homoeroticism, gender, and sexuality since the 1990s.

The theoretical framework employed in this dissertation is interdisciplinary, comparative, and queer. Contributing to the interdisciplinary field of Jewish queer studies, it draws from Jewish cultural studies, religious studies, critical biblical scholarship, rabbinics, literary criticism, queer and feminist theories, trans studies, and histories of gender and sexuality. As a comparative project, this dissertation looks at selected texts across genres, languages, temporal and geographical contexts, and authors' positionalities, which allows me to trace a literary lineage of the trope of queer *havruta* in its varying cultural contexts. The texts discussed in this dissertation include rabbinic midrash, Halakhah, Aggadah, biblical and talmudic commentaries, modern confessional narratives, short stories, plays, and novels. These texts are written in Biblical Hebrew, Rabbinic Hebrew, Rabbinic Aramaic, Modern Hebrew, Yiddish, and English, in the late Roman Empire, in Sasanian Persia, in Eastern Europe, in Canada, in the United States, and in Israel. The authors' positionalities include a range of Jewish affiliations (Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, secular) and gender and sexual identities (straight women and men, a lesbian woman, and gay men). My dissertation combines diachronic and synchronic approaches. It offers a comparative examination of the texts in question diachronically in relation to earlier literary works, and synchronically, in relation to other Jewish queer texts in the same period. The queer approach that this dissertation employs, and the method of queer genealogy in particular, aligns with a larger function of interdisciplinary scholarship, which transgresses and disrupts inherited disciplinary boundaries.¹⁰ Using gender and sexuality as categories of analysis, this dissertation examines the intersections of *havruta* intimacy, male homoerotic desire, homosocial continuums, Jewish masculinities, and Jewish education. While it focuses on a Jewish male homosocial relations and cultural representations of male same-sex experience, often in the contexts of

¹⁰ On interdisciplinarity and a queer turn in established academic fields, see Ahmed, *Queer* 22.

culturally specific constructions of masculinities, the queer framework employed in this dissertation includes feminist analyses, which prevents reinforcing traditional androcentric approaches.

This dissertation employs the method of genealogy developed by Michel Foucault (“Nietzsche” 386–87) and later enlisted by Judith Butler (*Trouble* viii–ix; *Bodies* 173; *Undoing* viii–ix, xxxiii), Jasbir Puar (“Queer” 122), Heather Love (5, 127, 147 and 494), Sara Ahmed (*Queer* 107, 154–55; *Promise* 89–90), and Nishant Shahani (1–3, 9–16), among others.¹¹ It is a type of comparative study that looks at particular modes of intertextuality that (re)construct new connections between texts and new cultural meanings out of continuities and discontinuities, identifications and disidentifications, repetitions and interruptions. It focuses on non-linear relationships between discourses, recognizes multiple origins rather than a single origin of a cultural formation, and emphasizes the effects of institutions and practices rather than their origins.¹² Works in Jewish studies apply the genealogical method to biblical narratives (Lefkowitz), rabbinic literature (Boyarin, *Carnal*), medieval Jewish mysticism (Wolfson; Magid), or modern Yiddish literature (Seidman, *Plot*). More recently, Zohar Weiman-Kelman employs the method of queer genealogy to trace literary history of Jewish queer women. Weiman-Kelman notes that moving between times, languages, and contexts allows to uncover potential connections that could become visible outside of the linear narratives of each single literature

¹¹ A number of recent works utilize queer genealogy or related methods of inquiry in cultural, literary, historical, and religious studies, as well as in queer theory, affect theory, and trans studies. These works discuss a genealogy of queer detachment (Price), the lineage of affective reading in medieval literature and modern fan communities (Wilson), a queer genealogy of women’s religious practice in Christianity (McLoughlin), a queer genealogy of Jewish women’s poetry (Weiman-Kelman), or queer genealogy of science fiction (Pearson).

¹² On queer critique of the representation of history in terms of linear progress, as the temporality of heterosexual reproduction or organized towards productivity in broader terms, see Edelman, *No Future*; Berlant; Warner; Freeman, *Time*. See also works on queer temporality as referring to “movements of time deemed regressive or unsuccessful” (Freeman, “Introduction” 3) or to “the lost moments of official history” that generate “a discontinuous history of its own” (Freeman, *Time* xi). Jack Halberstam argues that “queer uses of time and space, at least in part, develop in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (*Time* 1).

(xxvii–xxviii). Along those lines, the method of queer genealogy uncovers a family resemblance between the texts discussed in this dissertation by showing the process of reconstructing, recovering, and translating the traditional images of *havruta* to new contexts. Employing techniques of philological analysis, literary criticism, close reading, and queer reading, my dissertation brings Jewish texts that represent male homosocial desire within the context of study partnership into a conversation with each other and looks at the points of connection and rupture between them. In a way, this approach, adopted in recent works of queer scholarship, echoes the rabbinic method of non-linear (and often anachronistic) way of organizing a discussion by creating imagined conversations between different generations of the sages. This dissertation is not intended to be a comprehensive study of the history of *havruta*. The focus of this dissertation is not the historical origin of *havruta*, although this question inevitably plays a role in my discussion. Rather, this dissertation considers the kinds of narratives and possibilities of what can be recuperated as queer images of Jewish study partnership through a queer reading of the traditional images of these relations and through queer representations of *havruta* in modern Jewish culture. Similar to many recent works that utilize queer academic approaches, in particular, queer genealogy as a method of analysis, the trajectory of my project is not linear. It recognizes multiple and diffuse points of origin rather than a single origin as it applies to the trope of queer *havruta*. Through close reading of selected texts used as case studies, it employs the queer methodology of identifying literary lineage, kinship between separate moments of cultural imaginations. This approach resembles the very nature of *havruta*, which is, as Susan Handelman points out, a collaborative process of learning that invites the reader into a dialogue with teachers and writers past and present (16–17).

This dissertation is indebted to a number of important projects in Jewish cultural studies. It employs research of biblical homoeroticism and non-normative gender and sexual identities, such as the works of Howard I. Schwartz, David Halperin, Lori Lefkowitz, Martti Nissinen, Theodore Jennings, and Saul Olyan. It utilizes the studies of rabbinic gender and sexual discourses and intellectual culture, such as the ones by Daniel Boyarin, Michael Satlow, Jeffrey Rubenstein, Richard Kalmin, Max Strassfeld, and Rafael Rachel Neis. It also builds on the works on the homoeroticism of Torah study in medieval Jewish mysticism by Elliott Wolfson and Shaul Magid, and in medieval Hebrew homoerotic poetry by Norman Roth. As well, it draws on the studies of queer dynamics in modern Jewish literature and transformation of tradition in modern Jewish queer culture by Rebecca Alpert, Naomi Seidman, Warren Hoffman, Jeffrey Shandler, and Zohar Weiman-Kelman. This dissertation builds upon Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct* and, more recently, Naomi Seidman's *Marriage Plot*. Boyarin discusses the tradition of Jewish gender and sexual difference associated with Jewish intellectual life developed in rabbinic literature and in Ashkenazic¹³ yeshiva culture. Seidman traces continuity of this traditional Jewish queerness¹⁴ in, and after, the embrace of European conventions in the works of modernist Jewish writers who turned to the homoerotic possibilities of the traditional homosocial spaces such as the yeshiva or the Hassidic court. My work examines the cultural lineage of this literary tradition and its increasing significance at the turn of the new millennium.

Debates on the ancient Israelite/Jewish homoeroticism in critical scholarship often relate to two major intellectual paradigms, the essentialist and social constructionist approaches to gender

¹³ Most of the works discussed here are focused on Ashkenazic culture. Exploring the works that are not Euro-American centered requires a separate study.

¹⁴ The category of Jewish queerness as generally used in critical scholarship, as Seidman notes, "has meaning primarily in comparison with European gender ideals," hence reliance on this term has a danger of superimposing a foreign perspective upon the traditional Jewish structures (*Plot* 16–17).

and sexuality. The essentializing approach considers today's Western gender norms and today's Western category of sexuality to be cross-cultural, natural, and universal. In contrast, the constructionist approach, which I employ in this dissertation, understands gender norms and sexual categories as socially constructed and culturally specific. This approach challenges an easy correlation between the ancient and modern sexual categories—a correlation that, on the one hand, underlies identification of biblical or rabbinic characters as homosexual or gay and, on the other, denies a possibility of any form of homoeroticism in biblical or rabbinic cultures.¹⁵

This dissertation raises a larger theoretical question: What makes a queer reading or re-writing of traditional images possible, without doing violence to the earlier texts? This dissertation offers a two-fold answer, from a historical-literary perspective and from a queer theoretical perspective (both outlined in Chapter Two). The historicizing approach focuses on the context of production, on the cultural specificity of the traditional texts. As such, employing the constructionist method in studying the past helps in understanding traditional sexual and affective categories related to same-sex relations as specific cultural constructs rooted in the gender norms and in the homosocial settings of the pre-modern Jewish life. As I argue, historicizing classical Jewish texts reveals a specific form of heteronormativity that, in the absence of the modern Western category of sexuality, differentiated between phallogentric and affective discourses of same-sex relationships. The former represented a concern with the cultural meanings of specific sexual acts defined in terms of phallic penetration, whereas the latter depicted male-male commitments, intimacies and feelings, emotional and erotic, within homosocial contexts of the biblical heroic epics or rabbinic tales of scholarly pursuits. Within the ancient cultures, these two modes of

¹⁵ See Chapter Two of this dissertation for a more detailed discussion of the constructionist approach in gender and sexuality studies in relation to biblical and rabbinic homoeroticism.

representation did not negate one another. The repressive power of the phallogentric discourse coexisted with the homoerotic images of the affective discourse. In its turn, the culturally approved homosocial homoeroticism did not erase the heteronormative character of that culture. Alternatively, queer approaches emphasize the context of reception, the lines of inquiry that respond to contemporary concerns and to a reader's positionality. Accordingly, the queer theories and methods employed in this dissertation allow better understanding of the cultural project that the modern and contemporary literary works accomplish in their reworkings of the traditional texts and religious structures. This cultural project, I argue, offers a specific promise of home to queer Jews and, on a larger scale, new possibilities of relationship building for those who search for new forms of expressing their experience in terms that differ from the heteronormative, homonormative, or other conventional relational models. Combining historical-literary and queer approaches allows us to identify and analyze a cross-cultural literary formation that connects texts across languages, localities, and temporalities.

My analyses do not idealize male homosocial relations, which are oppressive and subversive at once. On the one hand, the turn to the traditional Jewish homosociality may reproduce some aspects of hetero/homo-patriarchal relations in which it is rooted. On the other hand, it can also challenge those relations. In this sense, I employ Sedgwick's strategy of a balance between the paranoid reading and the reparative reading that recognizes oppressive elements of a text and confronts problematic views and at the same time reads the text through a subversive lens, searching for moments that interrupt the text's assumptions and dominant discourses and open new possibilities within and outside the normative frameworks. This dissertation draws on the studies of homosocial continuum and queer (dis)identification. The concept of homosocial continuum, which developed in feminist and queer theory and in history of sexuality, for

instance, in the works of Adrienne Rich, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jonathan Ned Katz, refers to connections between the social, affective, erotic, and sometimes sexual aspects of relationships in same-sex environments that include emotional and physical intimacies without necessarily correlating with the modern categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality. The cultural strategy of “(dis)identifications,” which a queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz describes in his discussion of the relation of queers of colour to their respective mainstream cultures, involves simultaneous identification and disidentification with mainstream cultural forms. In contrast to either conforming to the dominant images or rejecting them, (dis)identification seeks to transform a cultural logic from within.

1.4 Notes on Terminology

DISCOURSE

David Biale, in his discussion of the history of Jewish sexual discourses in *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*, notes, adopting Foucault’s approach, that Jewish culture creates the erotic through literary constructs, which at once reflect and shape experience, “or, rather, the way people view their experience” (7). Drawing upon this approach, I use the term “discourse” in this dissertation as literature in connection with other kinds of cultural processes. My discussion presupposes that gender and sexuality are cultural constructs¹⁶ and that texts (discourses) are the main vehicle by which a culture creates the erotic.

HAVRUTA (alternative spelling: *hevruta*; Ashkenazi Hebrew or Yiddish: *havrusa* or *hevrusa*)

¹⁶ See my discussion of the constructionist approach to sexuality in Chapter Two, section 2.2. This approach understands sexual categories or identities and the meanings attached to sexual practices (as well as feelings and relationships) as culturally (historically) specific.

The term *havruta* comes from rabbinic Aramaic, yet the use of this term as designating a specific pedagogical model used in yeshiva studies may originate in the nineteenth century. Although a constant throughout Jewish history since the rabbinic period to varying degrees, the practice of studying in long-term pairs increased following World War I. The concept of Torah study in pairs, however, is widely popular in rabbinic literature of late antiquity, with multiple instances of applying the terms *havruta* (“companionship”) or *haver* (“companion” or “fellow”) to denote specific types of relationships among scholars. Therefore, unless specified, I use the term *havruta* as referring to the Jewish practice of long-term study partnership as it evolves throughout history, while being conscious of both continuities and discontinuities embedded in this term. See Chapter Two of this dissertation of an in-length discussion of the history of the term and the concept of *havruta*.

HOMOSOCIAL

The term “homosocial” refers to social relationships and bonds between people of the same sex that are not of a romantic or sexual nature, such as friendships or mentorships, often in gender-segregated spaces such as single-sex educational institutions, monasteries, military, or sports teams. This dissertation focuses on male homosocial situations of study partnerships in Judaism, typically within the gender-segregated settings of a rabbinic academy (*yeshivah* in Rabbinic Hebrew or *metivta* in Rabbinic Aramaic), a traditional or traditionalist yeshiva, or a study hall (*bet midrash*). Although there are important studies on female homosociality in feminist scholarship, such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America,” the notion of the homosocial typically refers to relationships between men. Feminist studies, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, critique homosocial

relations because of the extent to which they are used to maintain male power and domination as well as compulsory heterosexuality. These works also show a possibility of “a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (Sedgwick, *Between* 2), pointing out that homosocial relations can be potentially erotic in spite of, or because of their heteronormativity. In this sense, homosocial intimacies, which are typically void of sexual practices, can sometimes be viewed as homoerotic, although not necessarily, depending on specific sensibilities of the participants or interpreters (onlookers, viewers, readers). The homoeroticism of the traditional, patriarchal homosociality is not equivalent with queerness in the modern sense of gender or sexual non-normativity. Certain historical homosocial spaces and experiences, however, can have transgressive cultural effects and thus can be perceived as queer from a modern perspective.

JEWISH

Arguably, the available definitions of Jewish identity are no less complex and inconsistent than the definitions of gender or sexual identities. One may need to distinguish between “Jew” as a religious term (with “religious” itself as an equally inconsistent fantasy image) and “Jew” as a socio-cultural term that signifies the ways the fantasies about religion are manifested in a secularised sense of modern society. Works in Jewish cultural studies, such as Ann Pellegrini’s *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* or Lori Lefkowitz’s *In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities*, apply Judith Butler’s theory of performativity to Jewish identity to show the complexity and instability of the latter. Building upon these works, I approach Jewish identity as such, as well as Jewish gender and sexual identities, as performative categories enacted in cultural productions through interpretation and reworkings of earlier texts. For the purposes of my argument, I use the actualisations of contemporary Jewishness as ones in which the religious sense is culturally implied and fetishized erotically.

JEWISH QUEER LITERATURE/CULTURE

Defining a literary work as Jewish and queer (and, consequently, a definition of Jewish queer culture) in this dissertation is based on the content of the writing rather than on religious, ethnocultural, sexual or gender identities of the author. This definition helps explore the treatment of male same-sex desire in Jewish settings from various social perspectives. In this sense, for example, some rabbinic texts can be included in a broader corpus of Jewish queer literature. In my discussion of modern and contemporary Jewish queer works I include straight-identified authors, men and women (such as Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Maggie Anton) whose works are intended for mainstream audience while presenting treatment of Jewish queer themes, along with authors who identify as gay men or lesbian women (such as Tony Kushner, Michael Lowenthal, Evan Fallenberg, K. David Brody, and Jyl Lynn Felman) and who write primarily for LGBTQ audiences (Jewish or non-Jewish), often with the hope of reaching mainstream Jewish or larger audiences as well. The modern and contemporary Canadian, American, and Israeli writers discussed in this dissertation represent, when it is possible to decipher their affiliation, a spectrum of Jewish identities, including Orthodox, Conservative, traditional, Reform, nondenominational, and secular. Their works generally depict Jewish queer male characters and Jewish queer male experience (sometimes in relation to queer female and/or trans experiences) mostly in Orthodox or traditional Jewish settings.¹⁷

GAY/HOMOEROTIC/HOMOSEXUAL/QUEER

There is a lack of adequate terminology to describe the moments in the texts that I discuss in this dissertation without superimposing upon these texts categories that are foreign to them. The

¹⁷ See some of the recent anthologies and discussions of Jewish queer/gay literature (Jaffe; Summers; Crasnow; Sienna; Moskowitz).

distinction between “homoerotic” and “queer” is essential for the flow of my argument, since it is important to distinguish between the homoeroticism of biblical and rabbinic texts or the traditional homoeroticism of yeshiva homosociality, and a new queer space sometimes imagined in contemporary Jewish fiction.¹⁸

In contrast to earlier scholarship on the history of religion and sexuality (such as John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*), recent works usually refrain from using the terms “sexuality,” “homosexual,” “heterosexual,” “gay,” or “lesbian” when referring to pre-modern or non-Western cultural formations, to avoid superimposing upon these cultures the categories or identities that are foreign to them. More neutral terms such as “homoerotic” or “queer,” which do not involve culturally specific identities, are widely accepted in critical scholarship. While I follow this logic in my dissertation, I recognize the difficulties with these terms as well. The term “homoerotic,” as opposed to “homosexual,” suggests a different focus. Whereas sexual desire can be seen as primarily driven by an urge for sexual activity (which usually involves genital stimulation), eroticism is focused on the aesthetic and sensual appreciation and emotional and intellectual intimacies as sexual expressions. The use of “homoeroticism” to include all the references to same-sex sexual or erotic relationships in pre-modern literatures (as does, for instance, Martti Nissinen’s *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*) is historically and conceptually problematic, since it reads the notion of desire (*eros*) into instances that are fundamentally conceptualized around acts rather than

¹⁸ In contemporary Jewish culture the modern discourse of sexuality does not supersede traditional Jewish discourses of queerness; rather, in the modern period these two discourses begin to overlap. See Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory of overlapping models of sexuality. Sedgwick argues that, in contrast to Foucault’s assumption, the nineteenth-century minoritizing discourse of sexual identity did not replace the universalizing discourse exemplified in the notion of so-called sodomitic sexual acts; rather, Sedgwick asserts, the two discourses overlap and reinforce each other (*Epistemology* 47).

feelings, as in the case of the ban on sexual intercourse between males in Lev. 18.22 and 20.13, among other examples. Hence, I prefer the terms “queerness” or “same-sex relations,” bearing in mind that the term “queer” can be confusing, too, given its multiple meanings and the specific theoretical and political notions associated with some of them. Homoeroticism as such is not necessarily queer, especially if it reiterates phallogentric and patriarchal versions of masculinity. I reserve the term “homoerotic” for those images in traditional texts that represent desire and romantic¹⁹ attachments, as opposed to references to sexual acts in which a concern with erotic desire is absent. Generally, the homoerotic images do not explicitly reference sexual acts, although sometimes they include images of non-genital or non-penetrative intimate contact. Some of the traditional images may not be homoerotic in the context of their production, in the minds of their writers and intended readers. These images, however, often due to their ambiguity, can lend themselves to queer reading from a modern subject-position. My discussion of traditional homoeroticism or queerness in this dissertation draws attention to differences between ancient and modern sexual categories and to the plurality of traditional social contexts and cultural models, which bring to light different definitions of the sexual. It is important to bear in mind the differences in categorization of erotic experience in ancient and modern cultures, such as culturally conditioned notions about gendered sex roles. Ancient society also ascribed diverse cultural meanings to different erotic expressions or to similar forms of eroticism in different contexts.

¹⁹ I use the term “romantic” to differentiate between the sexual and non-sexual forms of intimacy, without superimposing upon the ancient texts the modern category of romantic love associated with the rise of capitalism, the dominance of the middle class, and the romantic movement (Katz 332–33). Some anthropologists argue that desire for romantic love and human connection is innate and a product of human evolution (Fisher, *Anatomy* 162–66 and *Why* 22, 74–75).

The terms “gay” and “queer” are not interchangeable. The gay rights discourse is associated with the homosexual movements in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, gay and lesbian activism in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, such as gay liberation movement and lesbian feminism, and the present LGBT activism since the 1990s (M. Stein 79 and throughout). It is based on the minoritizing view, which advocates the notion of gay identity as representing a sexual minority. It focuses on the struggle for inclusion and equality, for example, abolishing anti-sodomy laws or legal recognition of same-sex marriages. In contrast, the queer discourse resists the notions of identity (Butler, *Gender* 200-201 and throughout) and the norm (Warner 54-55 and throughout). Queer theorists generally critique gay rights discourse as homonormative, i.e., one that supports the dominant heteronormative structures, such as the institution of marriage (Duggan, *Twilight* 172–73). They also critique the rights discourse as one that limits variety of sexual experiences, whereas queer culture tends to expand the possibilities and access to pleasures as necessary steps for attaining sexual autonomy (Warner 7, 38). Hence, I reserve the terms “homosexual,” “gay,” or “LGBT” for specific types of categorizations, sexual identities, and movements (as in “gay synagogue”). The use of the term “queer” often denotes a meaning larger than sexual, sometimes referring to phenomena and cultural politics that resist normativity and signification, as opposed to identity politics and minoritizing discourses. Queer theorists emphasize the importance of retaining both sexual and social meanings of the term “queer,” as referring to non-straight and non-normative sexualities (Ahmed, *Queer* 68, 161; Warner 1-7). In this dissertation, I generally use the term “queer” as synonymous with “non-heteronormative,” as shorthand for a spectrum of experiences and identities related to gender and sexual diversity, and, for the purposes of this study, mostly referring to same-sex sexual or erotic experience, especially when referring to non-normative situations, regardless of the historical

context, self-identification, or politics (unless specified otherwise, as in “queer theory”). As Warren Hoffman notes, the term “queer” is useful “in describing moments in a text that are ‘odd,’ ‘unusual,’ or ‘strange’ (some of the original meanings for the word) and in which same-sex desire is evident, yet for which adequate terminology is lacking to describe such homoerotically charged scenarios” (5). Sara Ahmed makes a distinction between “queer feelings,” which can be found in texts across historical and cultural contexts, and “feeling queer,” which refers to a specific postmodern understanding of gender and sexuality (*Cultural* 146). It is the first meaning, as in “queer feelings,” to which I generally refer when using the term “queer” in this dissertation. Some of the works discussed in this dissertation, such as those of S.Y. Agnon or I.B. Singer, do not necessarily represent queer subject positions; nevertheless, they speak to queer subjectivity of their readers.²⁰ All of them participate in the formation of Jewish queer culture.

RABBINIC LITERATURE/RABBIS

The word “rabbis” in this dissertation is used as a technical term that refers to the authors and editors of rabbinic literature produced in the Roman province of Judaea (later “Syria Palaestina”; “The Land of Israel” in Jewish tradition) and in Sasanian Persia (“Babylonia” in Jewish tradition) approximately in the second to sixth centuries CE. Drawing upon the approaches in scholarship in rabbinics pioneered by Shamma Friedman which look at the Talmud as a literary work (S. Friedman; Neusner, *Rabbinic*; Boyarin, *Intertextuality*; Boyarin, *Carnal*; Kraemer; Hayes; Kalmin, *Sage*; Fonrobert, “Plato” 281; Labovitz 13; Rubenstein, *Stories*), I treat rabbinic

²⁰ The term “queer subjectivity” in this dissertation denotes particular sensibilities (erotic, affective, aesthetic, ethical), “queer ways of being and feeling” (Halperin, *How* 108), that participate in formation of the queer subject. For example, for gay men the actuality of Jewish intellectual life, in addition to and on the basis of its literal meaning, acquires a figurative erotic meaning; it becomes a figure of different experience, a figure that emerges from a particular Jewish gay positionality. As in other instances of queer reception of mainstream cultural images, noted by Judith Butler, Jewish queer subjectivity necessarily denotes a failure of identification, “this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong,” which becomes “the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference” (*Bodies* 219).

narratives as literary texts, as storytelling, rather than historical accounts of actual events. This dissertation is interested in the intertextual form of the rabbinic narrative tradition. In rabbinic storytelling, each document represents the ideas of its authors and redactors in a dialogue with other texts or ideas. The question of the possibility of their historical accuracy is beyond the scope of this dissertation. In a similar manner, building on Saul Lieberman's approach, I am generally interested in understanding the cultural assumptions that inform the selected talmudic texts, rather than the content of these texts *per se* (see Boyarin, *Carnal* 181). Hence, I often read rabbinic sources against the grain.

TRADITIONAL/TRADITIONALIST

In this dissertation, I understand the term “traditional” as referring to various forms of pre-modern Judaism, and “traditionalist” as denoting modern halakhic communities (mainly Orthodox, as well as some Canadian groups that belong to the Conservative Movement in Judaism) that reflect on traditional Jewish culture by representing a specific, static and uniform image of tradition (Sagi 9), often in a nostalgic, romanticized relation to the past. Traditionalism, a particular hermeneutical image of the past, is a case of the interplay between memory and history (Yerushalmi) that participates in an identity-making process (Sagi 6, 8–11). In contrast, liberal, mostly non-halakhic Jewish communities (Reform, most of Conservative in the U.S.A., Reconstructionist, Jewish Renewal, *Havurah* movement, and various non-denominational congregations) recognize the dynamic and diverse character of traditional Judaism and offer an explicit reflective criticism of tradition. The traditionalist and liberal groups within Judaism are modern formations that equally participate in the present development of the historical Jewish traditions through change and interaction.

Chapter Two: *Havruta* as a Queer Cultural Trope

2.1 Relationality of *Havruta* as a Pedagogical, Hermeneutical, Religious, Cultural, and Gendered Practice

2.1.1 Debates on Historical Origins of *Havruta*

There is no consensus among scholars on the historical origin of *havruta*. The critical scholarship on this issue offers four major theories, tracing the practice of *havruta* respectively to the rabbinic period, the medieval period, the nineteenth century, or the twentieth century. The support of the ancient roots of *havruta* could be found in the works of Rubenstein; Block; Brown and Malkus; Kent; Holzer; Blumenthal; Handelman; Holzer and Kent; Backenroth and Katz. Stern traces *havruta* to medieval yeshivot. Some other scholars argue for a more recent origin of *havruta*, dating it to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (Soloveitchik; Tishbi; Stampfer; Lamm; Segal; Stadler; Schwarz; Friedman). Although locating the origins of *havruta* in different historical periods, most scholars agree that the model of study pairs evolved in relation to the rise of dialectics as the highest value in Jewish intellectual activities.²¹ Whereas the term *havruta* in its today's meaning is most likely of relatively recent origin, the phenomenon of studying in pairs or small groups existed in Jewish culture long before.

The scholars who locate the origins of *havruta* in the rabbinic period point to the dialogical and interpersonal character of Torah study grounded in the oral transmission of the rabbinic

²¹ On the development of dialectical approaches in the Babylonian rabbinic traditions, in Geonic academies, in the works of the Tosafists in the twelfth century, and in *pilpul* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Rubenstein, *Stories* 146–47.

tradition prior to the written recording of the Mishnah and later the Talmud, and to the very texture of the Talmud as discussion, which shaped the culture of Jewish learning (Holzer and Kent 5). Some suggest that *havruta* emerged from the need to articulate the text, given the silent nature of the classical Jewish texts (Blumenthal 14). Holzer states that the concept of *havruta* reflects the very nature of the talmudic text as “a record of debates, arguments and counterarguments,” and in this way *havruta* demonstrates the importance that the rabbinic culture attributes to interpersonal dialectics in the development and acquisition of knowledge and to the interpersonal dimension of learning (“Either” 131–32).

Scholars point to examples of study pairs in the Talmud,²² such as the reference to 12,000 pairs of Rabbi Akiva’s students in his Beit Midrash in b.Yevamot 62b (Holzer and Kent 6) or to the story of Rabbi Yohanan who quit his academic work, lost his mind, and died after the death of his study partner Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a (A. Block 142; Blumenthal 15; Rubenstein, *Culture* 51; Kent, “Interactive” 25; Holzer, “Either”). An account in b.Ketubot 103b tells the reader that another sage, Levi had to leave Palestine for Babylonia after the death of his study partner Rav Efes, because he was unable to continue his studies without his partner. The story of Honi in b.Taanit 32a depicts a sage who upon his return to the study house after sleeping for seventy years could not find his study partners and friends, and so prayed to die. A tradition in the Palestinian Talmud references two students in Ashkelon who “ate together, drank together, and studied Torah together” (y.Sanhedrin 6.6). When one of the study partners dies, the other one cries and reprimands the city residents for not attending the funeral. Some traditions in b.Taanit 7b claim that the words of Torah do not endure for one who studies by himself, just as

²² Rubenstein points out that images of study partners are found almost exclusively in the Babylonian Talmud (*Culture* 53), since the emphasis on dialectical argumentation was critical for the very process of creation of the Bavli (*Culture* 2). Hezser, however, argues that study partners were a norm in Palestine as well (351–52), which stemmed from the nature of rabbinic network as a personal alliance system (324).

fire does not ignite by itself. These traditions also compare scholars sharpening each other's minds to pieces of iron that sharpen one another. These and other rabbinic stories that emphasize the value of a study partner can be linked to the value placed on dialectics in the Babylonian Academies (Rubenstein, *Culture* 51). Kent, too, attributes the significance of *havruta* in today's Jewish educational settings to the fact that it "draws on a tradition of learning rooted in early yeshivot and rabbinic expressions of valuing a partner and dialectic" ("Interactive" 24). Segal, however, suggests that *havruta* was a method that "was practiced, or at least advocated, by the Talmud" but that it was only one among a variety of pedagogical models practiced in the rabbinic period such as study groups, teacher-student pairs, or individual learning (*Havruta* 5).

A theory advocated by David Stern and cited by Kent attributes the popularity of *havruta* to the rise of *pilpul*, a set of methods of talmudic study and exposition in the sixteenth-century yeshivot. This theory is based on the discussion of *pilpul* and studying with a partner in the same context in a medieval Jewish text, Elijah Capsali's *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* written in 1523 (Kent, "Interactive" 24).

Some scholars, such as Lamm or Tishbi, link the rise of *havruta* as normative study practice to the nineteenth-century Lithuanian yeshivot, particularly, the Volozhin Yeshiva (Kent, "Interactive" 24–25). For example, it was documented that Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the "Natziv," who headed the yeshiva of Volozhin from 1853 to 1892, encouraged his students to study in pairs (Parush 49). These scholars agree that *havruta* was an innovation, a new pedagogical technique developed in the Volozhin Yeshiva to encourage students' independence and interdependence, shifting the focus from the teacher as the source of knowledge to the community (Segal, *Havruta* 6, 9). According to Lamm, *havruta* in the Lithuanian yeshivot replaced self-study that had been the predominant method of Torah study prior to that period

(Kent, “Interactive” 24–25). Tishbi, however, argues that the purpose of *havruta* in the Lithuanian yeshivot was to eliminate the students’ need for a teacher (Segal, “Schooling” 152).

A number of scholars date the popularity of *havruta* to the twentieth century. Shaul Stampfer argues that *havruta* only became a dominant form of Torah study in the beginning of the twentieth century because of the democratization of the yeshiva world (105). According to Stampfer, the highest value in Jewish study houses was historically placed on learning alone at an advanced level, nurturing the intellectual elite. It was only in the post-World War I period that, with the democratization of Torah study and inclusion of the masses in the yeshivot, the *havruta* became the widespread method of studying as the number of weaker students needing help increased. Stampfer suggests that while *havruta* was practiced in the nineteenth century, and probably was introduced at that time, it was not the predominant method of study, but rather a tool reserved for the weaker students who needed a stronger student’s help, while self-study remained the norm (105).

Some other scholars take a step further and suggest that *havruta* only became normative in the middle of the twentieth century, when in the Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) society in Israel studying in the yeshiva and the practice of dedicating one’s life to Torah study became standard for every Haredi male, as opposed to the historical patterns of reserving full-time studying for the elite group (Friedman; Soloveitchik; Stadler; Schwarz). According to this theory, this transformation popularized learning activities and led to “the centrality of the learned text as the principal resource for daily practice” (Stadler 203), elevating *havruta* “as the focal point of yeshiva-based study of the Talmud” (Schwarz 98–99).

2.1.2 Multiple Functions of *Havruta*

Today *havruta* is a widespread educational method in traditional and non-traditional Jewish institutions alike, across denominations. In non-Orthodox settings, *havruta* is no longer reserved for males or for partners of the same gender, and the study material can include modern texts, religious or secular, along with the Talmud or other traditional Jewish literature (Holzer and Kent 7–8). The function of *havruta* in Jewish educational settings includes an effort to demonstrate historical continuity (Holzer and Kent 2).

In contemporary Judaism, *havruta*, the study pair, is often seen as the predominant, traditional method of studying Jewish religious texts. Many scholars refer to *havruta* as “a signature Jewish pedagogy” or “a signature Jewish educational model” (Shargel 4; Segal, “Schooling” 151; Backenroth and Katz 461; Levisohn and Kress 461). Segal calls *havruta* “the most significant practice of Jewish textual study” and “the lifeblood of Jewish learning, the backbone of Torah study as we know it” (*Havruta* 6). Kent refers to *havruta* as “a core mode of text learning” (“Theory” 215). *Havruta* is seen as a central practice in the educational settings of the Orthodox yeshiva (Schwarz 98; Blumenthal 22). At the turn of the new millennium, the practice of *havruta* “has become an increasingly formalized vehicle in the training of rabbis in non-Orthodox seminaries” as well (Brown and Malkus 209–10).

Havruta has also been appropriated in many modern settings beyond yeshiva or rabbinical schools, including secular educational contexts, for example, in adult Jewish learning, day school and supplementary school settings, Hillel gatherings, and Jewish professional development programs (Kent, “Theory” 215), as well as elementary, middle school, and college classrooms (Holzer and Kent 7). Holzer and Kent rightly point out that, “no longer confined to traditional institutions devoted to Talmudic studies, *havruta* has become a relatively widespread

phenomenon across denominational and educational settings of Jewish learning” (167). In non-traditional contexts, the practice of *havruta* can involve studying modern texts and secular materials (Shargel and Laster 64). It can also serve as a form of creative partnership in literary, artistic, and educational projects for Jewish novelists (such as Maggie Anton), filmmakers (such as Judith Prays and Samuel Hayes), or visual artists (such as Tobaron Waxman). Non-traditional *havruta* can include two female partners, female-male pairs (Holzer and Kent 7–8; Zion 109–10), or trans/non-binary partners. In these ways, the practice of *havruta* today often transcends its religious or male homosocial origins, serving as an important educational tool for Jewish conversations about gender, sexuality, or race. As Ruth Calderon notes in a lecture cited in Noam Sachs Zion’s *Romantic Rabbis*, the contemporary female or gender-mixed *havruta* opens possibilities for new reading of the ancient rabbinic texts that were written by men and for men (83). *Havruta* is also employed in trans and non-binary artistic contexts, such as Tobaron Waxman’s work *Self Portrait as Pshat* (Waxman; Dzmura), or in anti-racist projects such as *Whiteness Havruta* by April Baskin at *Joyousjustice.com*.

2.1.3 *Havruta* as Pedagogy

The existing scholarship explores pedagogical, social, hermeneutical, cultural, and political aspects of *havruta* as an educational method. Many works note the relational and affective characteristics of *havruta*. Scholars in education point to cognitive, social, and affective benefits of *havruta* learning (Segal, *Havruta* 9–10). Studies show that learning in *havruta* improved students’ “abilities to verbalize their understandings through reading text aloud and debating one another, opened their eyes to new perspectives, engaged them in argumentation, and empowered them to take charge of learning” (Shargel).

The majority of critical scholarship on *havruta* discuss *havruta* in the field of education. These studies examine the educational value of *havruta* and explore the possibilities of applying the *havruta* model to modern pedagogies, in the contexts of middle and high school, college, university, graduate school, or in the professional development programs. These works sometimes emphasize the role of *havruta* in fostering Jewish identity and in developing relational, affective, social and emotional learning through dialogue that involves debating different perspectives and personal vulnerability (Kress; Raider-Roth). Some works note that some of the major benefits of *havruta* meet the core goals of contemporary higher education as expressed in some university mission statements, including active student involvement in the learning process, development critical thinking skills necessary for life-long learning, depth of understanding, tolerance of others, and individual accountability, which helps to prepare students for being competent team members in their professional careers (Bergom et al. 19, 20). Some scholars suggest that applying *havruta*-style learning, as a reflective pedagogy, to secular universities, wherein students may meet people from different religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, can offer students the opportunity to hear different perspectives, and in this way help them in their understanding of multiculturalism and diversity (Shargel 24; Wright et al.).

There are also studies of the use of the *havruta* model in online learning. As an example, Zoom breakout groups allow online *havruta*-style pairs in the context of a virtual classroom (Gold 181). These studies note that *havruta* method helps increase student motivation and establish relevance in online courses (Backenroth and Katz 452, 461). The ongoing collaborative practice of *havruta* study with a partner can also help in professional development for educators who master digital technologies (Gold 184). Gold notes the role of professional peer

relationships in adopting and learning new technologies (167, 170–71). The new possibilities of applying the *havruta* model to online learning and teaching gained particular significance during the COVID-19 pandemic that diminished the personal and interactive component of the educational process.

While elements of *havruta* are valued and employed in other contexts, these elements are not *havruta* in and of themselves. Many works draw parallels between *havruta* and the modern educational model of cooperative learning when students study together independently, in pairs or small groups (Holzer and Kent; Brown and Malkus; Segal, *Havruta*; Segal, “Schooling”; Backenroth and Katz).²³ *Havruta* and cooperative learning share such outcomes as positive interdependence and contribution of study partners to each other’s learning, individual accountability, development of critical thinking, enhanced satisfaction with the learning process, development of positive social interactions, and community building (Brown and Malkus 218, 210–11). *Havruta*, however, remains a distinct Jewish learning strategy (Brown and Malkus 209). For instance, whereas cooperative learning is integrated into the classroom environment, the *havruta* learning in a yeshivah is generally separate from the classes conducted by teachers (Segal, *Havruta* 14, 16). As well, the classical Jewish texts that are studied in a traditional *havruta* often present different or conflicting viewpoints within one text (Schwarz 109). The studies in *havruta* are generally focused on the very process of text study rather than on measurable aspects of the material to be learned (Schwarz 110–11). The main difference is the length of the study partnership. Whereas modern cooperative learning methods pair students for a one-time collaborative discussion within a class session, in *havruta* within modern educational

²³ The system of cooperative learning, developed by Morton Deutsch in the late 1940s-early 1950s, gained popularity since the 1980s and was successfully implemented in many educational institutions across North America (Segal, *Havruta* 14).

settings “students remain with the same partner over the course of a term” (Bergom et al. 21). Moreover, the traditional concept of *havruta* typically entails ongoing sessions with the same study partner on a regular basis for years, sometimes as a lifelong practice, which forms lasting close personal relationships. As Blumenthal argues, “the practice of lifelong, regularly studying text with another is so much a part of being Jewish that it is not considered remarkable in the Jewish community, yet it is unique in the world of pedagogical practice” (10).

Havruta offers an experiential learning model (Segal, *Havruta* 6). Kent suggests that *havruta* is “a practice in the sense that it is something that participants do that is made up of other practices,” which construct knowledge through doing (“Interactive” 30–31). Traditional *havruta* study involves recitation, translation, explanation, and discussion (Kent, “Interactive”), with the core practices of listening and articulating, wondering and focusing, supporting and challenging (Kent, “Theory” 215). These practices are predicated upon the experience of the “encounter between learners and between learners and text” (Raider-Roth 220; Gold 29). The study partners’ actions serve as a source of knowledge (Kent, “Interactive” 29).

Havruta study as discussion, as “the pedagogy of slowing down” (Kanarek 15), emphasizes the process of learning, not its product (Shargel 7). Segal asserts that, since the traditional goal of *havruta* is meeting the ideal of Torah study for its own sake (*Torah lishmah*), as it developed in the Lithuanian yeshivot, the learning process itself, which has an autonomous religious value, becomes far more important than the ultimate attainment of knowledge. *Havruta* responds to the students’ need to feel that they are part of this process and that they themselves are integrally connected to the text that they study through developing new ideas, by the call to innovate and to contribute to the process of Torah study (Segal, *Havruta* 11).

The educational benefits of *havruta* include a high level of motivation, accountability, and interdependence (Segal, *Havruta* 13; Shargel 8; Schwarz 110). The process-oriented approach of *havruta* learning helps generate what Schwarz calls “the sense of the worthy” that enhances the intrinsic motivation of students (110–11). Shargel and Laster note that “*havruta* learning supports independent, creative, and divergent thinking while simultaneously building relationships among students, combining intellectual and interpersonal dimensions” (63, 68). The dialogical character of *havruta* allows transformative learning, “meaning making through hermeneutics and through the *havruta* encounter with different perspectives” (Holzer and Kent 187–90). It develops students’ ability to see multiple perspectives, to appreciate the perspectives of others, and to use evidence to justify their interpretations (Shargel 8). Through learning with partners, students think about knowledge in complex ways that are contextual and relative (Bergom et al. 22). By constructing the meaning of the texts through practice and through relationship, *havruta* partners learn about the complexity and uncertainty of the epistemological process (Kent, “Interactive” 29).

Havruta learning as an autonomous activity within the dyads facilitates student interaction and engagement as well as student agency, a high level of autonomy, independence, and creativity, including freedom in the interpretative realm, freedom to uncover interpretations that differ from the normative authoritative interpretations (Backenroth and Katz 460; Shargel 9, 11; Segal, *Havruta* 11; Schwarz 99, 104). *Havruta* helps students in developing their textual and close reading skills (Holzer, “What Connects” 184; Segal, *Havruta* 9–10) and critical thinking skills (Brown and Malkus 219) by training students to question texts, to look for ambiguity in the text and for possibilities of multiple interpretations (Shargel 8). Studying texts with a partner also allows more opportunities to express oneself (Shargel and Laster 64). For example, studies show

that *havruta* can become a space of dissent in a traditional yeshiva, where students use texts that they study to support their disappointment and anger or to call for significant transformations in the yeshiva world (Stadler 199). The effects of *havruta* go beyond the actual study sessions. Segal notes that even in the time when *havruta* partners are not learning, the peer interaction between the study partners “may foster the personal internalization of what Torah study is all about” and so it becomes a setting for personal breakthroughs (*Havruta* 13).

2.1.4 *Havruta* as Hermeneutical and Relational Model

Kent speaks of the sense of partnership that defines *havruta* relationships. *Havruta* as partnership is based on mutual respect, responsibility, and interdependence (Kent, “Interactive” 29). The key feature of *havruta* is interdependency between engagement with the text and engagement with the study partner. The *havruta* model of studying is discussion based and thus fundamentally dialogic. It combines intellectual, interpersonal, and textual skills (Shargel and Laster 63–64). *Havruta* constructs text study as a relationship. Textual practices become intrapersonal and interpersonal, a dialogue with texts by and between partners (Holzer and Kent 41, 54–56, 167). *Havruta* as a model of textual interpretation requires a co-construction of the text’s meaning that is interpretive and dialogical (Holzer and Kent 31, 37). *Havruta* presupposes that the text is mediated by dialogue with a partner, through relationship, and that the meaning of a given text can only be found with a partner (Blumenthal 8). As a dialogical and intersubjective model of hermeneutics it is not the context of the text that constructs the meaning but rather the text’s response to the personal experience of the reader, the relevance of the text to the present-day life of the student (Blumenthal 59–60).

In the traditionalist Jewish world, *havruta* is a major site of cultural citationality and performativity. Through dialogue between *havruta* partners, “ancient religious knowledge is

cited and recreated” (Stadler 188). The meaning of the text is actively constructed by the readers (Shargel and Laster 63). This is partially due to the peculiarities of the Hebrew language, the ambiguities and polysemy of the Hebrew syntax, the lack of punctuation and lack of vowels, which call for multiple interpretations depending on the vocalization or the syntax. As Kent points out, *havruta* learning happens through social interaction and intersubjectivity because “[a]s *havruta* partners work on interpreting a text, their interactions affect their intellectual work” (“Interactive” 28). *Havruta* creates a context for students to read themselves into the text and out of it. Segal calls this unique type of connection to the text in *havruta* “epistemic appropriation,” wherein “the very act of inserting their voices, separately and together, into the Talmudic discussion gives the students a type of ownership over the knowledge, or over the text” (“Schooling” 159–60). According to Segal, this epistemic appropriation is predicated upon the process-oriented approach to Talmud study, “engaging in being a Talmud learner,” regardless of the success in the products or results of learning; the core of this learning process is encounter with the partner that informs the nature of the encounter with the text yet also has a value in itself (“Schooling” 160).

Havruta forms “relational learning communities” (Gold 168). In a typical environment of the yeshiva or study hall (*beit midrash*), students spend the whole day, or most of the day, learning beside hundreds of other study pairs, which allows some scholars to define *havruta* as a “total institution” (Schwarz 99). Holzer notes that *havruta* “is not to be reduced merely to a formal learning mode. Rather, *havruta* learning may also be conceptualized as the locus for the cultivation of interpersonal relationships and ultimately as a humanizing activity” (Holzer, “Either” 146). This feature of consistent partners studying together over time makes *havruta* a unique learning model (Halbertal and Hartman Halbertal 460). Bergom points out that a

prolonged close relationship between *havruta* partners helps develop trust and “provides the framework within which students can evaluate their own epistemological assumptions,” playing substantive roles in each other’s learning (21–22). Choosing and maintaining consistent partnerships go hand in hand with choosing the texts. Supportive relationships serve as a significant component of the learning process (Gold 184). The sustained partnership becomes a site of meaning making as the context of interpreting the text (Shargel 6–7).

As a relationship, *havruta* has an ethical significance. It is based on ethical commitment and mutual responsibility, commitments to the partner and to the text, to the routine and to the schedule (Blumenthal 9–10, 20). It also involves responsibility for one’s own learning and for one’s *havruta* partner, finding meaning in the text as a shared task, through supporting and challenging each other’s interpretations of text. The relationship between *havruta* partners is one of mutual care and support rather than competition. Kent stresses that “the two people involved in the *havruta* are responsible for their own learning and for each other’s learning. Their success is viewed as interdependent” (Kent, “Theory” 219). *Havruta* teaches sensitivity to the Other, the ability to listen, open-mindedness, and vulnerability (Holzer and Kent 2, 193, 195–201).

In *havruta* learning, “meaning arises through the interaction and relationship of the three partners of *havruta*—the two people and the text” (Kent, “Theory” 217). The text becomes a third partner (Shargel 11). Holzer and Kent identify three reciprocal relationships that constitute *havruta* (“the *havruta* learning triangle”): a relationship between the learner and the text; between both partners; and between the learner and himself (31, 52–53). Kent points out that in *havruta* “effort is directed at constructing ideas and also relationships, and the ways in which ideas are constructed affect the working relationship and vice versa” and that “during a *havruta* discussion, participants construct and reconstruct the meaning of the text through their moment-

to-moment interactions” (“Theory” 219). *Havruta* thus presents the experience of relationship, of the encounter between learners and between learners and text (Gold 171). Reading a text with a *havruta* partner is not only an intellectual process, but also a social and bodily experience that includes reading each other’s tone, body language, facial expressions (Shargel and Laster 64; Shargel 8). Blumenthal notes that in *havruta* the text mediates dialogue and, in its turn, the text is mediated by dialogue with another, through relationship (8).

The uniqueness of *havruta* rests in the dynamic between its members, in an emotional bond that intensifies the experience of learning together and caring for each other (Blumenthal 20). Brown and Malkus point to the emotional experience of studying in *havruta* and to the fact that *havruta* learning creates “a positive bond between students and connects students personally to the texts they study,” transforming learning into friendship (216–17). Choosing a *havruta* partner is often based on personality rather than on intellect (Brown and Malkus 219), in many ways similar to choosing a romantic partner. For instance, one of the respondents in Brown’s and Malkus’s study stated: “I would find it really difficult to learn with someone if I didn’t genuinely like them and want to know about their lives” (217). Relationships that *havruta* partners form over time make *havruta* a safe space, supportive, empathetic, and nurturing, building trust between students, ability to discuss controversial topics, challenge one another, to do something prohibitive or uncomfortable, expanding the learners’ horizons (Shargel 8; Gold 170), provided that one finds a suitable partner.

Some make a connection between the relational characteristic of *havruta* and the rabbinic metaphor of Torah as lover. Ruhama Weiss and Sachs Zion speak of a “committed love” paradigm of Torah study, which assumes that personal life, inner psychological processes and contemporary situations are not to be separated from the interpretive dialogue with Torah. The

student's subjectivity becomes a tool of interpretation of the text, to the extent that Torah study could be seen as "interpersonal relationship between committed lovers," "the act of lovemaking between Torah and learner" and between the *havruta* partners (85–86).

2.1.5 Ritual and Identity: *Havruta* as a Religious, Cultural, and Gendered Practice

Although *havruta* is easily applicable to secular educational settings and to studying secular literature, it is generally perceived as a traditional method of studying Jewish religious texts, not merely as an educational tool, but also as a cultural practice (Blumenthal 8) and as a form of devotion and ritual (Shargel 7). Some debate whether *havruta* is mandated by Jewish law (Segal, *Havruta* 5). In any case, scholars agree that *havruta* draws on a historically Jewish practice (Kent, "Interactive" 24). Whether the historical roots of *havruta* are older or more recent, this practice today is typically based on an assumption of authenticity and historical continuity, a connection to history and tradition (Holzer and Kent 2). The use of *havruta* by Jewish educators across denominations, religious and secular alike, is typically motivated by the association of this method of studying with Jewish religious traditions and Jewish identity (Backenroth and Katz 461), and with dedication to the larger community (Blumenthal 8). For many, studying the religious texts in *havruta* provides a sacred space, an aura of holiness and a sense of connection to the communal past (Gold 171). This is especially true in Orthodox communities. Segal notes the appeal to heritage and "an air of authenticity" that serves as a rationale of implementing *havruta*-based learning programs in Jewish educational institutions today, because "Torah study with a partner seems to carry with it the weight of history and of tradition": "just as students are motivated to anticipate and observe Shabbat in the acclaimed model of Hillel, they are encouraged to sit and learn in dialogue with a partner, in the popular model of Abbaye and Rava"

(*Havruta* 7). This perception of authenticity engenders an affective connection to *havruta* (Segal, “Schooling” 151), producing cultural nostalgia (Segal, *Havruta* 9).

Since *havruta* originally developed as a method of studying sacred texts, it was based on the idea that the very process of Torah study had intrinsic worth, a fulfilment of the religious commandment of learning Torah (Segal, *Havruta* 10), embracing “a norm within rabbinic literature on the central religious importance of Torah study, rather than learning Torah for extrinsic purposes” (Schwarz 100). Heilman suggests that the fact that Talmud study in *havruta* is process and activity oriented allows a view of the process of learning Talmud in *havruta* not only as an intellectual activity but also as cultural performance. It is a Jewish ritual and a form of play because “it cultivates particular kinds of experiences with and attitudes toward texts and people, highlighting the value of the text, of ongoing learning in community and of dialectics” (Heilman 61–62). In this sense, *havruta* has religious and culturally performative functions, not only pedagogical ones.

Traditionally, Torah study was reserved for men and served as a major marker of masculinity in Jewish communities, wherein intellectual life was predicated on gender segregation in a patriarchal society. The exclusion of women from studying the Talmud shaped the male homosocial settings of *havruta*. In present-day traditionalist Jewish communities, *havruta* retains its significant role in the construction of gender. Orthodox Jewish society is self-fashioned as a “society of learners” (*hevrat halomedim*), where “men are obliged to engage with Judaism’s canonical texts” (Stadler 187). Stadler points out: “The yeshivas and kolels (Talmudic academies for married men) where these studies take place are the centers of the Haredi masculine pious life, a life regulated by the rhythm of lessons (*shi‘urim*) and paired study (*ḥevruta*)” (187). Although in non-Orthodox settings gender segregation is neither required nor encouraged,

gender and homosociality, whether between males or between females, sometimes remain important factors in the way *havruta* pairs are being formed and operate even in egalitarian Jewish denominations. Brown and Malkus, in their study of non-Orthodox *havruta* partnerships, find gender in *havruta* to be “a central concern with many of the students whom we interviewed” (221–22). A respondent in Brown’s and Malkus’s study, a female rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, communicates the significance of the homosocial context of *havruta* in modern settings: “If I look around the Beit Midrash, I would say probably two-thirds of the *hevrotot* are single gender, man-man or woman-woman, and one-third are mixed.” This respondent affirms that gender as a category plays a significant role in determining with whom she chooses to learn as well. She explains this phenomenon by the importance of “how two women relate to each other and how we do things” (221–22).

2.2 Critical Studies of Jewish Homoeroticism: From the Binary Paradigm toward the Pluralistic Paradigm

I would identify a shift in Jewish critical scholarship since the 1990s away from an assumption of an inherent conflict between Judaism and homosexuality toward recognizing the varieties of Jewish heteronormativity, Jewish homoerotic discourses, and narratives of Jewish queerness. The pluralistic paradigm, however, did not completely replace the binary Jewish-queer paradigm in Jewish studies. As the examples below demonstrate, these two approaches co-exist and sometimes overlap in today’s critical scholarship.

The binary approach implies the essential “heterosexuality” of the ancient Israelite/Jewish cultures and a historic cultural conflict between Judaism and “homosexuality” that are perceived as a characteristic exclusively of foreign cultures such as the Canaanites or the Greeks. These ahistorical assumptions or claims often go hand in hand with anachronistic translations of

biblical or rabbinic terms referring to specific sexual acts. This includes translations of *mishkevei ishah*, “lyings of woman,” in the Hebrew Bible and *mishkav zakhur*, “lying of male,” in the Talmud as “sodomy” (a concept of the eleventh-century Christian theology²⁴) or “homosexuality” (a concept that originates in the psychiatric theories of the turn of the twentieth century²⁵), the terms and concepts that are foreign to the literature and culture of ancient Israel or

²⁴ I refer here to the term “sodomy” used in biblical translations, commentaries, and critical biblical scholarship. This term is absent from the original texts of the Hebrew Bible. Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), describes the notion of sodomy that existed in Western popular, theological, and legal discourses before the turn of the twentieth century as a category of forbidden sexual acts, primarily (but not exclusively) referring to anal penetration of a male or female (43). Jonathan Ned Katz, in *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality* (2001), discusses the nineteenth-century concept of “acts of sodomy” (6, 331, 333–34, 337, 351), which referred to anal penetration between males. Mark Jordan, in *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (1997), demonstrates that “sodomy” is a medieval Christian theological concept originating in the writings of the eleventh-century theologian Peter Damian. Damian coined the term “sodomy” (*sodomia*) by analogy with blasphemy (*blasphemia*), defining it as a form of heresy and rebellion against God (29). Damian’s concept of sodomy was rooted in the Christian exegetical tradition, which sexualized the Sodom myth in Genesis 19 in light of early Christianity’s ascetic ideals. Jewish interpretive tradition emphasizes inhospitality (expressed through the attempted rape of male visitors by local men) as the central theme of Genesis 19. This understanding of the “sin of Sodom” is reflected in intra-biblical exegesis (Ezek. 16.49; Is. 1.10, 3.9; Jer. 23.14), Midrash (Pirke Derabbi Eliezer 25, Tosefta Sota 3; b.Sanhedrin 109a), medieval Jewish parshanut (Rashi to Gen. 18.21; Ramban; Metsudat David), and modern biblical commentaries across Jewish denominations, e.g., those of Gunther Plaut in Reform Judaism, Nehama Leibowitz in Modern Orthodox Judaism, and Moshe Eisemann in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism. Some biblical interpretations from late antiquity—both Jewish Hellenistic (Philo and Josephus) and early Christian (Paul and Clement of Alexandria)—shifted the meaning of the “sin of Sodom” from ethical concerns (hospitality, a key value in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East) to sexual pleasure, according with dominant ideologies of their time that condemned the body, pleasure, and non-procreative sexual practices. Jordan shows that Jerome and Ambrose further redefined the term “Sodomites,” originally referring to the residents of the biblical city of Sodom, to mean “sodomites”—men and women who engaged in “sodomitical acts,” a broad category of sexual sins, especially non-procreative or extramarital sexual acts, as disobedience to God. Augustine narrowed the meaning of “sodomites” to specifically refer to men engaged in anal sex with other men, which he condemned as disordered passions, excessive sexual desire, akin to fornication, adultery, or gluttony (Jordan 33–35). Within the framework of medieval Catholic theology, Peter Damian expanded earlier concepts of the “sin of Sodom” and “sodomitical acts” into the new category of “sodomy” as a moral vice manifested in sexual acts disconnected from reproduction and thus as a form of religious heresy, denial of God (Jordan 45–66). Thomas Aquinas further developed the idea of “sodomy” as “unnatural” pleasure, reinforcing his broader theological position that denied the legitimacy of any sexual activity apart from reproduction (Jordan 136–158). From the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries onward, “sodomy” also became a political and legal category, leading to the enactment of anti-sodomy laws and the prosecution of those accused of sodomy throughout Europe and later in other regions of Western influence. The “sodomy laws,” with unstable definitions that included cross-sex or same-sex anal or oral penetration, masturbation, bestiality, or any other non-procreative sexual practices, persisted in most Western countries until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Canada decriminalized sodomy in 1969 and the United States in 2003.

²⁵ The terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” first appeared in the 1868–1869 writings of Karl-Maria Kertbeny, an Austro-Hungarian writer, and in *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a German psychiatrist, in 1886.

ancient rabbis.²⁶ In this way, these instances superimpose categories of later periods and the modern Western understanding of sexual normativity upon the ancient texts.²⁷ Examples include the writings of Norman Lamm in 1974 (376 et passim), Eugene Borowitz in 2007 (290), David Novak in 2008 (232), and Melvin Konner in 2009 (26, 41), as well as the biblical commentaries and annotations by Ephraim Avigdor Speiser in 1964 (142–43), Nahum Sarna in 1989 (*JPS*, 135), Baruch Levine in 1989 (123), Everett Fox in 1995 (78), or Jon Levenson in 2004 (“Genesis 2004” 41) and 2014 (“Genesis 2014” 38). These works often uncritically reproduce the stereotypes and conventions of the older Christian theological tradition of exegesis and biblical studies, as found, for example, in the commentaries on Genesis by Hermann Gunkel in 1901 and Gerhard von Rad in 1961 (217–18); on Leviticus by Martin Noth in 1965 (136); and on Ezekiel by Walther Zimmerli in 1969 (349–350); or even in more recent works in biblical studies such as Calum Carmichael’s 1997 book on Leviticus (55). For instance, these scholars read the Sodom story in Gen. 19 and the law in Lev. 18.22 as condemnation of homosexual identities, desires, and relationships, even though these notions and themes are absent in the biblical texts in question. The Second Edition of the Jewish Study Bible in 2014 reproduces without revisions the annotations to Gen. 19 published in the First Edition ten years earlier, in 2004, which read “the sin of homosexual conduct” (Levenson, “Genesis 2004” 38) into both Gen. 19 and Lev. 18.22.

Representation of homoeroticism or any form of same-sex sexual experience as foreign or antagonistic to Judaism goes hand in hand with denial of sexual non-normativity in Jewish historical and religious experience or in Jewish cultural imagination and erasure of Jewish

²⁶ The use of the medieval term “sodomy” and the modern term “homosexuality” interchangeably, which is common in these writings, is another example of anachronistic and ahistorical approaches.

²⁷ In contrast, Baruch Schwartz, in his annotation to Lev. 18.22 in the 2014 edition of the Jewish Study Bible, points out that “Biblical and ancient Near Eastern culture was not familiar with homosexuality in the sense of a defined sexual orientation or lifestyle” and that “it acknowledges only the occasional act of male anal intercourse, usually as an act of force associated with humiliation, revenge, or subjection” (239).

homoerotic discourses. Many scholars criticize Jewish religious and academic worlds for reinforcing invisibility of queer experience in Jewish history, for exclusion of the body, sexuality, and homoerotic desire from the inquiry in Jewish biblical, talmudic, or medievalist studies, and for intentional writing out histories of non-normative narratives and practices from Jewish historiography (Hirsch 83; Carmi; Roth 22; Leneman 143, 148; Howard I. Schwartz 8; Magid 123). The tendencies in Jewish scholarship until the 1980s to ignore or misrepresent the homoerotic Hebrew poetry of medieval Spain or until the 1990s to deny a possibility of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible are telling examples of the attitudes that were prevalent in Jewish studies in the twentieth century.²⁸ This pattern of erasing non-normative sexualities persists in some major works of Jewish scholarship in the new millennium. For example, academic works on the Hebrew Bible published in the second edition of the Jewish Study Bible in 2014, such as Brettler's essays on modern Jewish biblical interpretation (Brettler, "Modern") and on gender in the Bible (Brettler, "Gender") or Sweeney's essay on the modern study of the Bible (2177), omit discussion or mention of biblical homoeroticism or modern queer approaches in Jewish biblical interpretation or in modern study of the Hebrew Bible. Another example is a monumental collection of primary sources on modern Jewish history, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* compiled and edited by Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz. This book, which is widely used in today's university courses in Jewish history, claims to remain "the most complete sourcebook on modern Jewish history available" (Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz back cover), and yet even its most expanded and updated third edition published in 2011 fails to include any documents related to LGBTQ Jews. Indicatively, a biographical note in *The Jew in the Modern World* about Jiří Mordechai Langer, whose works I discuss later in this

²⁸ Cf. a critique of many applications of historical-critical method in Christian religious studies governed by socially conservative political and religious agendas (Harding 99).

dissertation, terms Langer's work as "Freudian interpretations of Jewish mystical literature and piety" (841), failing to acknowledge (or at least to name) the topic of homoeroticism that is the subject of Langer's main work *The Eroticism of Kabbalah* (this note also avoids mentioning the title of Langer's book), as well as Langer's identity as a homosexual Hasidic Jew. These conventional presumptions also inform some works in Jewish cultural and queer studies. For example, Howard I. Schwartz's 1994 *God's Phallus*, which is one of the first works in Jewish scholarship that pointed to the homoeroticism of classical Jewish texts, takes for granted the assumption of historic Jewish fear of homoeroticism (1, 3–4, et passim). As many other biblical scholars, Howard I. Schwartz reads the Sodom story as a condemnation of "homosexual desire" associated with the Canaanites (93–95), reinforcing the assumption of same-sex sexuality as culturally foreign to ancient Israel. Such a reading replaces the theme of sexual acts present in Gen. 19 with the theme of "homosexual" desire that is never mentioned in this biblical text. It also overlooks the biblical parallels between Gen. 19, where the perpetrators are the Canaanites, and Judg. 19, where the perpetrators are the Israelites. As another example, Shokeid's study of a gay synagogue claims that the cultural discourse of home for queer Jews is marked by the conflict between "the yeshiva" and "the bar," study and play. Shokeid assumes a tension between Jewish text culture and gay sex culture, between the central Jewish religious value of intellectual pursuits, such as studying biblical and rabbinic texts, and the sexual scenes of gay life (28, 40–41).²⁹

²⁹ The binary model and its narrative of conflict could also be found among gay activists and queer scholars, often as a binary of religiosity and secularity, which represents religion, and Judaism in particular, as the source of Western homophobia and, therefore, as the enemy of gay people, typically referencing the Sodom story or the Levitical law as prooftexts. This binary discourse goes back to some of the early homosexual movements at the turn of the twentieth century (e.g., the groups associated with Benedict Friedländer and Hans Blüher in Germany), which generally constructed the modern ideal of male–male eros upon the model of "Greek love" which was seen as inherently antithetical to Jewish sexuality (Ilany 140). This discourse is also evident in the U.S. and Canadian homophile periodicals in the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Mattachine Review* (Allen 23), or in the works of queer

A new paradigm in Jewish scholarship that focuses on the multiplicity of gender, sexual, and homoerotic discourses in Jewish culture challenges the supposition, shared by some homophobic and antihomophobic readers, that homoeroticism is completely unknown or vigorously opposed by biblical and rabbinic texts and that Judaism is to be distinguished from the nations with which it came into contact in this regard. For example, Jennings claims that homoeroticism was less repressed in ancient Israel than in the surrounding cultures (237, 240) because biblical homoeroticism was not restricted to the hierarchy of social roles, which was central to Greek pederastic relationships. Instead, it took a greater variety of forms, such as the homoeroticism of Israelite monotheism or privileging feminized masculinity (Jennings 198, 238–40). Nissinen suggests that the assumption of ancient Israelite/Jewish homophobia signifies appropriation of some Hellenistic concepts and popular rhetorical tropes that represented ethnocultural and religious difference as sexual and gender deviance (47, 88–97). The pluralistic paradigm shows a more nuanced understanding of Jewish sexual and homoerotic discourses, their diverse forms, and their changing cultural meanings in specific historical contexts. It is generally more attentive to the cultural specificity of pre-modern Jewish texts, to mutual influences and reinterpretations of cultural models, to change over time, and to tensions between conflicting discourses. The works that emphasize the plurality of Jewish sexual discourses explore subversive traditions in biblical and rabbinic texts and in medieval and early modern Jewish literature. Recent

theorists in the 2000s, such as Lee Edelman's 2004 *No Future* (19) or Heather Love's 2007 *Feeling Backward* (5). Orit Avishai points to the religion vs. LGBTQ+ paradigm still existing in sexuality studies, noting that religion is still a blind spot in queer theorizing. Avishai's recent book, *Queer Judaism: LGBT Activism and the Remaking of Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel*, draws attention to the phenomenon of Orthodox Jewish queer self-organizing and growing recognition of sexual and gender diversity in traditionalist Jewish communities, the phenomenon that transcends the narrative of conflict and points to numerous examples of "LGBT persons of faith who embrace their sexual identity not in spite of—but because of—their commitment to the Jewish tradition" (Avishai xii). See also works that point to a postsecular turn in queer scholarship. E.g., Jasbir Puar notes the dangers of easy correlation between religion and homophobia, as well as between Western secularism and sexual equality (*Terrorist* 13). See also critique of these works, which points to a problem of ignoring heteronormativity and homophobia of religious communities (Dhawan 191).

scholarship recognizes that Jewish tradition does not simply affirm or repress the (homo)erotic. It presents various constructions of sexual desire and behavior, including diverse homoerotic models, through its own discourses and counter-discourses, as well as through subversive readings of mainstream cultural models.³⁰ Seidman argues that there are varieties of heteronormativity and shifting modes of patriarchy within traditional Jewish culture (*Plot 16*), as well as “many varieties of Jewish sexual discourse” in traditional and modern Jewish cultures (*Plot 13*).

Works in biblical studies reconstruct what Pardes calls counter-traditions, which subvert dominant discourses on gender and sexuality in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Pardes reads the Priestly story of creation as reinterpretation of the Yahwistic one (56). The egalitarian relationship between the male and female lovers in the Song of Songs can be viewed as rewritings of the patriarchal model of the garden of Eden in Gen. 2-3 and of the marriage metaphor in Ezek. 16 and 23 (Pardes 118). Adler reads the Song of Songs as an example of non-phallic eroticism that subverts the genital sexual definitions of the Jewish legal material (*Engendering* 139–40). Biale reads the story of Judah and Tamar in Gen. 38 as subversion of

³⁰ The recognition of the diversity of traditional Jewish gender and sexual discourses relates to the larger and older intellectual ethos of acknowledging and unpacking multiple meanings of the Jewish texts. Jon Levenson contrasts the recognition of the “pluriform character of the Hebrew Bible” in Judaism against a uniform reading of the Bible in Christian tradition exemplified in the christological exegesis (*Sinai* 4). Robert Alter emphasizes fundamental ambiguity of the biblical texts. This “montage of viewpoints” and resistance to consistent linear formulation, often due to the art of the editor, to the “composite artistry” of the Hebrew Bible (Alter 153–54), finds development in the midrashic understanding of plurality of meanings. Michael Fishbane notes that since late antiquity, Jewish scholars defined the sanctity of the biblical texts in terms of these texts’ exegetical latency, the depth of their hermeneutical possibilities as levels of truth, to the extent of “exegetical violence” often done to the plain-sense of the sacred text (38–39). Jay Harris points out that in rabbinic exegesis “the entire text of the Torah was generally conceived as being extraordinarily elastic and replete with meaning” (252). Harris contrasts the midrashic assumption of polysemy of the biblical texts, which informed biblical interpretation in medieval Jewish communities, with a modern assumption that the definitive meaning of a text can be established through critical historical and/or linguistic analyses. The rabbinic and medieval Jewish exegetical methodologies parallel the postmodern textual assumptions that assert plurality of meanings and a relation of the text to the positionality of the reader. Consequently, there is curiosity about midrash in poststructuralist scholarship and literary circles noted by David Stern (1).

Leviticus incest laws (18). Others call for interpretations that are attentive to the multiplicity of constructions of same-sex desire and practice in ancient Israel. For instance, Jennings places Howard I. Schwartz's description of homoeroticism in the relationship between God and Israel found in prophetic marriage metaphors in a larger context of other biblical traditions.

Accordingly, Jennings proposes a theory of multiple models of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible, identifying three main types of male-male relationships: (a) the "warrior love" of heroes and their companions such as David and Jonathan or David and Saul (3–12); (b) the shamanistic form of eroticism presented in the relationships of Samuel and Saul or Elijah and Elisha, or in the groups of prophets, *bne-hanevi'im*, or in the encounters with "holy hustlers," *kedeshim* (81–115); and (c) the relationship between God and what Jennings calls "transgendered" Israelite males, such as Joseph in Gen. 37–45³¹ or Israel in prophetic images (131–77).

Works in rabbinics, such as Boyarin's *Carnal Israel*, identify competing discourses in rabbinic literature. Boyarin points to historical variations and contradictions of discourses related to the dialectics of sexual desire, e.g., conflicting midrashim on Eve and the primal androgyne (*Carnal* 17–45) or the differences between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis in the discussions of the Torah study and sexual activity (*Carnal* 133–66). Boyarin also points to conflicting rabbinic discourses of sexuality as two types of control, the discourse of control in the conjugal bed and the discourse of free intimacy that may represent diverse traditions and different definitions of sex (*Carnal* 111, 120–22). Satlow's *Tasting the Dish* discusses multiple types of rabbinic rhetoric of sexuality. Strassfeld's *Trans Talmud*, Neis's *When a Human Gives Birth to a Raven*, and Lev's *And the Sages Did Not Know* analyze talmudic discussions about bodies that,

³¹ One can argue that the term "effeminate" would describe Joseph better, since there is little or no textual support for Jennings's claim that the biblical character of Joseph is transgendered.

while exceeding exclusively male or female categorization, coexist in rabbinic literature with the dominant rabbinic discourse of male-female binarism. These works point out that ancient rabbinic conceptions of masculinity and gender as such were already multiple and fluid (Strassfeld 20; Lev 17).³²

The pluralistic paradigm in critical scholarship serves as a theoretical framework for my dissertation. Differences between ancient and modern sexual categories, and between different definitions of the sexual within one corpus of texts, such as the Hebrew Bible or the Talmud, contribute to our understanding of a plurality of homoerotic models in Jewish culture. Thus, narratives that might be non-sexual or non-erotic in biblical or rabbinic texts can become sexual or erotic in modern contexts, and vice versa (e.g., see the reception history of the Sodom story or the legend of David and Jonathan). As well, some classical texts or figures can already be (homo)eroticized or sexualized in later traditional texts (for example, rabbinic midrashim on Joseph and on the Song of Songs or medieval kabbalistic commentaries on the biblical Creation stories). Although this conversation is more pronounced in biblical scholarship, it is also relevant for studies of rabbinic literature. Satlow points out that the ancient rabbis perceived different sex acts as part of different discursive domains (*Tasting* 3). Boyarin argues that because the talmudic culture did not have a category of the homosexual nor the homo/hetero divide it allowed for much greater normative possibilities for the homoerotic (“Jews” 354) and “a much greater scope for forms of male intimacy” (*Unheroic* 17). Adler draws attention to non-phallic, polymorphous eroticism³³ of the biblical Song of Songs or rabbinic *havruta* partnership, as opposed to the

³² See also other works on the rabbinic gender categories such as *androgynos*, *tumtum*, *saris*, or *aylonit* such as Kessler, “Rabbinic”; Kukla; and more recently, Max Strassfeld’s *Trans Talmud* (2022), Rafael Rachel Neis’s *When a Human Gives Birth to a Raven* (2023), and Sarra Lev’s *And the Sages Did Not Know* (2024). On representation in popular culture, see Bazant.

³³ I use the term “polymorphous eroticism” as one that attaches erotic meaning to the entire body and to the entire personality or to any body part, as well as to any aspect of sensual or sexual experience (sight, voice, scent, touch)

penetrative sexual acts addressed in Genesis and Leviticus or in talmudic halakhah (“Virgin” 138–40, 147–48).

The debates on the ancient Israelite/Jewish homoeroticism relate to two major intellectual paradigms in modern scholarship, the essentialist and social constructionist approaches to gender and sexuality. The heterosexual presumption of essentialist biblical scholarship is exemplified by claims of such differently positioned scholars as Howard I. Schwartz, a pioneer of Jewish queer studies, and Markus Zehnder, a conservative Christian theologian who opposes queer approaches in biblical studies. Howard I. Schwartz points to the homoeroticism that underlies the biblical notion of the intimate relationship between a male God and male Israelites. Howard I. Schwartz points out that, in biblical and rabbinic literatures alike, “the Israel that is collectively imagined as a woman is actually constituted by men, like Moses and patriarchs. And these men love a male deity in ways that are imagined erotically and sensually” (2–3). Nevertheless, Howard I. Schwartz asserts that ancient Judaism’s concept of masculinity was defined by heterosexuality because it required marrying and having children, and thus by a repression of male-male eroticism (3, 243). Zehnder argues that neither David nor Jonathan could have a “homosexual” (the terminology that Zehnder uses) relationship because each of them had sexual relationships with women and produced offspring (144), which, according to Zehnder, proves their

rather than privileging certain bodily sites (such as genitals) or certain sexual acts (such as penetration). Freud describes “polymorphous-perverse” sexuality as a “pre-genital” stage in psychosexual development. Drawing on Freud’s theory, Herbert Marcuse writes that sexuality is by nature polymorphous, not limited to specific practices or sites (49). Marcuse understands polymorphous eroticism, based on proximity senses, where the sexual and the affective constitute a continuum rather than a binary, as a major way of shifting the organization of sexuality from repression, domination, and alienation under the performance principle (which is geared towards procreation and production) to the immediacy of connection and relation (39–40, 75–76). In Jewish thought, Rachel Adler, building on Marcuse’s work, points to the significance of discourses of nonphallic, polymorphous eroticism in the biblical and rabbinic texts—e.g. found in the traditional interpretations of the Song of Songs or rabbinic *havruta* partnership—as subversion of the genital-penetrative sexual definitions of the Jewish legal material (e.g., in Leviticus or in talmudic *halakhah*) (*Engendering*, 140). See also Foucault’s notion of “polymorphous sexualities” (*History* 12–13, 18) as the pleasures that transcended the phallocentric definition of sexuality.

heterosexuality (168). Howard I. Schwartz supports a homoerotic reading of the biblical texts whereas Zehnder opposes such a reading, but both scholars assume that the fact of reproduction, because it requires participation in cross-sex intercourse, would automatically be understood by ancient readers to represent a prohibition against all forms of same-sex sexual contact. Historical evidence, however, shows that cross-sexual sexual relations did not exclude same-sex relations in the ancient world and that the idea of an exclusive sexual identity was foreign to pre-modern cultures. If one were to use modern categories to describe the ancient Mediterranean cultures, bisexuality (Cantarella) or, rather, universalizing view of sexuality (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 1–2, 9, 40)³⁴ would probably be the closest and more applicable terms. This example shows that the dividing line between major trends in scholarship lies not so much in distinctions between the historical-linguistic method (which Zehnder advocates) and the literary-queer approach (which Howard I. Schwartz employs) but in differences between theoretical assumptions, goals, and scope of historical-philological or literary analysis of the ancient Judaic texts.

Social constructionists such as Nissinen, Jennings, Boyarin, Ackerman, Olyan, Stone, Baruch Schwartz, or Harding, who draw upon the works of Michel Foucault and David Halperin, warn against the projection of modern assumptions onto the past, such as the notion of a sexual identity that is based on object choice or the assumption of a necessary connection between sexual acts and erotic desire, or between different types of sexual acts and desires. Dover is one of the first historians who pointed to the differences between the ancient and the modern sexual categories in the context of ancient Greece (60–68, 201–02). Halperin warns against interpretation of the classical images, such as the pairs of Achilles and Patroclus or David and

³⁴ Sedgwick proposes to differentiate between minoritizing and universalizing understanding of the sexual definition. The minoritizing view relegates same-sex sexual feelings and practices to “a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority” whereas the universalizing view assumes the possibility of same-sex experiences “in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 1–2).

Jonathan, in terms borrowed from the sexual categories of later ages, whether in terms of the Athenian pederasty or modern homosexuality (“Heroes” 87). Schwartz points out that “biblical and ancient Near Eastern culture was not familiar with homosexuality in the sense of a defined sexual orientation or lifestyle” (239).³⁵ As Foucault and other scholars have demonstrated, the fundamental distinctions between sexual acts and sexual feelings, characteristic of pre-modern cultures, disappeared at the turn of the twentieth century with the rise of the modern concept of sexuality that, within its original psychiatric context, linked romantic relationships and sexual acts to erotic feelings and sexual desires in a new category of sexual identity as defining one’s personality (Foucault, *History*; Halperin, “One Hundred” 15–16). The constructionist approach, which this dissertation employs, draws attention to the differences in categorization of erotic experience in ancient and modern cultures, such as culturally conditioned notions about gendered sex roles, and to different cultural meanings that ancient society ascribed to different erotic expressions or to similar forms of eroticism in different contexts. This approach stems from Foucault’s work that argues that the concept of a sexual identity did not exist until the modern period wherein sexuality is understood ontologically as the “truth” of one’s being (*History of Sexuality*, vol. 1).

2.3 Between Leviticus and David and Jonathan: The Jewish/Queer Binary in Context

The second and third chapters of this dissertation identify and analyze the male-male erotics of *havruta* and Torah study, its functions and cultural effects in traditional and modern contexts.

³⁵ See also scholarship on the differences between sexual categories emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and those of the previous periods (Smith-Rosenberg; Faderman; Katz). Katz shows that in the nineteenth-century United States “romantic lovers and sodomites inhabited different spheres, leaving a great unmapped space between them” (335).

This section addresses the tabooed boundaries and limits of this erotic, the line between the homosocial eroticism and homosexuality as it concerns the boundaries of acceptable Torah study as a practice. When do the scholars become a queer threat to the aim of the study? When do they fail? When does their desire for intimacy become a rejection of the Torah? This section explores the divides that the Jewish-queer binary is put in place to protect in their changing cultural contexts. It shows how sexual and affective categories of the biblical and rabbinic texts, associated with historical constructions of gender, acquired new meanings in the modern era and transformed into the binary discourses of Jewishness and homosexuality. It also demonstrates the ways contemporary Jewish queer culture resists and subverts these discourses, re-writing the traditional images once again.

2.3.1 Dual Representation of Same-Sex Relations in Ancient Judaic Literature: Affective and Phallocentric Discourses

I suggest that there is a need to qualify the pluralistic model in today's critical scholarship. In many cases, divergent sources that represent same-sex relations in biblical or rabbinic texts, such as homoerotic imagery, on the one hand, and the material condemning specific male-male sexual practices, on the other, cannot be classified as competing or conflicting traditions, nor do they negate each other. Rather, the difference between these two sets of texts demonstrates the logic characteristic of ancient Mediterranean cultures that defined the sexual in relation to specific acts (such as penetrative intercourse) as opposed to affects (such as homoeroticism of homosocial bonds). In the representation of same-sex interactions in ancient Judaic literature, typically, sex is not erotic (sexual acts are not generally associated with feelings) and eros is not sexual (desire and homosocial bonds are not necessarily associated with genital practices) (see, among others, Boyarin, *Carnal and Unheroic*; Carr; Douglas, *Leviticus and Purity*; Steven Greenberg; Halperin,

“Heroes”; Nissinen; Rubenstein, *Culture*; Satlow, *Tasting*). Therefore, employing a constructionist approach and drawing upon multiple models of homoeroticism discussed in critical scholarship, I suggest that it is helpful to distinguish between different discourses within biblical and rabbinic texts, which dually represent same-sex relations. Biblical and rabbinic cultures arguably demonstrate two major discourses surrounding same-sex relationships, or what I would call phallocentric³⁶ discourse and affective discourse (in and among other discourses of same-sex experience), each of which entails specific cultural meanings.³⁷ Each of these discourses reflected different concerns and performed different functions within the same cultural logic.³⁸ Socially approved (and often praised) male homosocial bonds, with their

³⁶ The term “phallocentric,” in a sense of the cultural arrangements of sexual relations and experiences around the phallus as signifier of power, appears in some works in critical biblical scholarship, such as Carden (89), Jennings (73), and Rashkow (11). Rashkow points to the practice of circumcision as a religious identity marker that “defines males and males only as the full members of the covenant community” and thus characterizes biblical Israel as “a phallocentric society” (11). The symbolic meaning of the phallus as representing power and status as the primary meanings of masculinity is also evident in the episodes of oath “under the thigh” in the stories of the patriarchs such as Abraham or Jacob in Gen. 24.2-3, 9 and 47.29, which affirmed the servant’s or son’s obedience and loyalty, submission to authority (Howard I. Schwartz 87–88). By the same token, in some midrashim the ancient rabbis attributed an enormous penis, along with hyperbolized sexual abilities, to Samson as a signifier of the masculine power of a warrior who was supposed “to deliver Israel from the Philistines” (b.Sotah 10a on Judg. 13.5 and 14.24; cf. y.Sotah 7b). Cf. a midrash about Nebuchadnezzar’s gigantic penis and the practice of raping defeated kings attributed to him (y.Shabbat 149b). See also the discussion of the rabbis’ male organs in b.Bava Metsia 84a that I address later in this dissertation.

³⁷ That does not mean a soul/body dualism characteristic of the Hellenistic and Christian cultures, which was generally foreign to the biblical and rabbinic traditions (Boyarin, *Carnal* 6–9, 57). The phallocentric/affective binarism of the ancient Israelite/Jewish culture differs from the Christian distinction between concupiscence, physical lust associated with the doctrine of the original sin, and spiritual “true love,” emotional bonds without sexual acts, as in *agape* (often in a male homosocial context of love between monks, which sometimes had homoerotic connotations) or in “courtly love.” It also differs from the nineteenth-century distinction between romantic love, which excluded the sexual, and sexual desire or acts of sodomy (Katz 6, 331, 333–34, 337, 351). While often separating sexual acts and desire or emotional attachment, Judaic literature typically did not view the physical and the spiritual in opposition to each other. Hence, I prefer the term duality to dualism.

³⁸ Some scholars explain different traditions such as the Levitical law and the legend of David and Jonathan as a tension between law and narrative, pointing out that narratives could either contest legal codes or they could be ignorant of them (Jennings 200). Indeed, in the biblical and rabbinic texts, law and narrative at times demonstrate different conceptual frameworks or they could represent discrepancies between normative notions prescribed by the legal traditions and the transgressive narratives that disrupt these norms, whether through myth and literary imagination or through actuality of social reality sometimes reflected in storytelling. Yet laws and narratives, such as the Levitical law and the Sodom narrative, often demonstrate one cultural logic. The homoerotic narratives of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, such as the legends of David and Jonathan or Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, that did not have parallel references in the legal materials did not necessarily stand in opposition to the legal texts: the latter simply had different concerns. The divergent traditions could be consistent within one conceptual framework that differentiated between the sexual, understood in terms of phallic penetration, and the affective, which often

emotional intimacies, on the one hand, and condemned sexual acts between males, on the other hand, had different cultural meanings and belonged to separate domains of human experience. The romantic love between male heroes in ancient epics signified normative virtues such as courage and loyalty, which in later texts translated into the philosophical values of intellectual and moral perfection. In contrast, the sexual acts between males signified perceived feminization and a threat to one's manly honour. The dual images of same-sex experience in traditional Judaic sources thus reveal two discursive worlds that are not reducible to each other. These two foci of Jewish religious texts determine what is seen and what remains unseen in each case.

Chapter Three of this dissertation analyzes the rabbinic traditions that exemplify the affective discourse, such as the aggadot about Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish and other rabbinic images of Torah scholars and study partnerships, along with respective interpretive traditions. This section outlines the biblical affective discourse in the case of the David and Jonathan narratives in their context of production. It also discusses the phallogocentric discourse as represented in biblical and rabbinic texts, such as the Levitical legal tradition and the male rape stories. Finally, it examines some rabbinic traditions in the Mishnah and the Talmud that demonstrate the rabbis' understanding of the relationship between the affective and the phallogocentric discourses.

The affective discourse, which is the focus of this dissertation, was organized around erotic or romantic feelings that included deep emotional attachments and images of male beauty and desire, generally non-phallic, in the context of male homosocial relations normative in the

represented homosocial bonds. Hence, I find it more helpful to look at traditional texts along the lines of the distinction between different discourses, each including different laws and different narratives, rather than between law and narrative. See also Strassfeld's observation that one cannot assume that we can easily separate between law and narrative, between midrash and halakhah (22, 57). Neis points to the incoherencies of the rabbinic law, which claimed and elaborated the biblical tradition of classification and separating categories yet also recognized a "far messier world," multiplicity and blurring boundaries (*When* 5-6).

ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman societies. As an example, the narratives of David and Jonathan in 1 Sam. 18-20, 23 and 2 Sam. 1 describe power struggle between two royal dynasties of ancient Israel that represented two Israelite tribes, the House of Saul from the tribe of Benjamin and the House of David from the tribe of Judah. The goal of the biblical storytellers is justification of the reign of the Davidic dynasty (in the pre-exilic version of the Deuteronomistic History) or the hope for a restoration of Judean monarchy (in the exilic and postexilic editing), through rewriting previous historical accounts (R. Friedman; Levin; Nissinen; Olyan, “Surpassing”). The biblical narrative describes the transfer of royal authority from the House of Saul to the Davidic dynasty, the decline of Saul’s reign and David’s ascent to power. The narrators emphasize David’s loyalty to Saul and his innocence in the deaths of Saul and his son Jonathan. In this context, the theme of Jonathan’s attachment to David is a literary and rhetorical device that serves the political agenda of the writers or redactors of these texts, “David’s apologists” (Olyan, “Surpassing” 15), presumably Judean royal scribes in the court of Davidic kings or exilic/post-exilic scribes of the Persian period, to legitimize David’s claims to royal authority. The narrative emphasizes David’s divinely chosen status and Jonathan’s irrational support of David out of love for him. According to the biblical text, King Saul’s son Jonathan, the heir to the throne, is willing to transfer his rights to David and implicitly recognize David as the true king of Israel. The literary plot of the biblical text shows to the reader that “the king’s own son should desert the royal court in favor of the very man who is to usurp his place” (Halperin, “Heroes” 82).

To this end, the biblical writers employ the story of David’s and Jonathan’s love relationship. It is likely that the biblical authors borrowed the legend of David and Jonathan from earlier Israelite traditions of warrior friendship that might have been similar to the images of heroic

couples in other ancient epics such as Gilgamesh Epic or Iliad. The homoerotic imagery that was part of the conventional depiction of the homosocial relationships of heroes in the ancient Mediterranean cultures served the apologetic purposes of the biblical writers and redactors, making Jonathan's love for David more convincing to the readers who might have been familiar with these popular traditions.

In depicting the relationship between two men, the biblical texts use the images of beauty and erotic gaze (1 Sam. 16.12; 14-23; 17.38-42). They employ the language of romantic and erotic feelings, phrases such as "Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David" (1 Sam. 18.1), "Jonathan loved David as himself" (1 Sam. 18.1 and 20.17), and "Jonathan desired David very much" (1 Sam. 19.1; my translation). They also utilize the language of commitment and union (1 Sam. 18.1-4; 19.1; and 23.15-18). As well, there is imagery that is often used as sexual symbolism in the Hebrew Bible and in other ancient Near Eastern texts such as the images of bow and arrow (1 Sam. 18.4, 20.1-23, 24-34, and 20.36; 2 Sam. 1.22). In his poetic lament, David juxtaposes Jonathan's love to him with the love of women, claiming that Jonathan's love was "more wonderful than the love of women" (2 Sam. 1.26). These and other elements of the narrative allow a homoerotic reading or are open to queer interpretations. Jonathan's love for David can be interpreted in political terms, as expression of Jonathan's loyalty to David, similar to the Assyrian loyalty oath in vassal treaties, or in erotic-romantic terms, as expressions of desire, affection, and commitment. These two ways of reading are mutually complementary: Jonathan's erotic and romantic love of David supports the narrative's claim of his political support of David and his willing to transfer his royal rights to him.

Critical biblical scholarship is divided concerning the interpretation of the relationship of David and Jonathan. Some read it as sexual or homoerotic (Gunn; Boer; Schroer and Staubli;

Olyan; Stone; Jennings). Others interpret it as non-sexual yet depicted through homoeroticized language and images (Ackerman; Bonjour and Römer; Jobling; Nissinen). Still others understand it as neither sexual nor erotic but as a form of friendship or political allegiance (Bar-Efrat; Brettler; Gagnon; McKenzie; Zehnder), which, to some, may include “warm personal intimacy” (McCarter 77). This debate often involves arguments based on biblical intertextuality. The works that advocate a heteronormative, anti-homoerotic interpretation of the story of David and Jonathan, such as Zehnder (167–68) or McKenzie (15), often read this narrative in light of the Levitical law or the story of Sodom as proofs that the biblical authors could not have depicted David as engaging in a sexual relationship with another man. This argument of “the canonical context” (Zehnder 167) views the biblical canon as uniform, monolithic, and static. See Harding’s critique of this argument, which Harding calls “the canonical control” (145–56, 286–87). This approach fails to recognize the diversity of biblical traditions and sources and their changes over time in the historical process of shaping the biblical canon. Others challenge the suppositions that Israelite culture could not possibly have any form of homoeroticism (Jennings 36) or that the prohibition on same-sex intercourse between men in Leviticus necessarily entails that the writers of the David and Jonathan story must have been familiar with it or complied with it (Olyan, “Surpassing” 15).

Scholars who support some form of homoerotic reading of Samuel draw attention to different biblical sources and propose that Samuel and Leviticus had different concerns and attitudes. For example, Olyan suggests that Deuteronomistic History in Samuel predates the Holiness Code in Leviticus and therefore these texts belong to different historical contexts (“Surpassing” 15). Nissinen views Samuel and Leviticus as competing traditions within one historical period and thus as instances of ideological differences between Priestly and Deuteronomistic sources (56).

Homoerotic interpretations, too, often turn to biblical intertextuality and appeal to other biblical parallels. Some point to analogies in language and imagery between the David and Jonathan narrative and the love poetry in the Song of Songs (Schroer and Staubli; Howard I. Schwartz). Others find analogies between Jonathan's love for David in Samuel and Jacob's love for Rachel in Gen. 29 (Olyan, "Surpassing"). Some others compare the images of David's beauty in Samuel and Joseph's beauty in Gen. 37-45 (Lefkovitz 91; Goldman 80; Speiser). Still others examine the phallic metaphors that parallel fertility and virility imagery in Gen. 49.24, Job 29.20 or 1 Chron. 8.40 (Ackerman 183–84).

Both sides of the debate, pro-gay and anti-gay, build their arguments on modern sexual assumptions that are foreign to the ancient texts. They search for evidence of genital activity in the classical texts that depict homosocial relationships and thus fail to account for the pre-modern differentiation between sexual practices and erotic feelings or emotional attachments. Biblical scholars that oppose a homoerotic reading of the David and Jonathan legend typically focus on presence or absence of "genital stimulation" as the sole criterion for characterizing the relationship of David and Jonathan in the biblical narrative as either "homosexual" or "heterosexual" (Zehnder 133, 156–57). According to Zehnder, the "genital stimulation" would have manifested itself in the Biblical Hebrew verbs *shakhav*, "to lie with," as in the Levitical prohibition, or *yada'*, "to know [someone]," as in the Sodom story (156-57). This claim of a necessary dependence of the affective narratives upon the phallocentric discourse is based on the modern assumptions that are derived from the modern category of sexuality and that contradict the cultural logic of the biblical texts. In turn, some works that support a homoerotic understanding of Samuel propose a sexual reading of the text, such as an obscure phrase *ad-david higdil* in the depiction of David's and Jonathan's meeting, which JPS translates as "David

wept the longer”: “When the boy got there, David emerged from his concealment at the Negeb. He flung himself face down on the ground and bowed low three times. They kissed each other and wept together; David wept the longer” (1 Sam. 20.41). The literal meaning of the original Hebrew is “until David grew larger [became greater].” There has been a suggestion that it may refer to David’s erection and physical consummation of love.³⁹ Peter Ackroyd in *The First Book of Samuel* (1971) translated *ad-david higidil* as “to a great climax” (168). Warren Johannson, in his entry “David and Jonathan” in *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (1990), took a step further and translated it as “until the ejaculation” (298). The interpretation of *ad-david higidil* as “erection” is also found in Richard G. Brentlinger’s 2007 *Gay Christian 101: Spiritual Self-Defense for Gay Christians: What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (157) and Jean-Fabrice Nardelli’s 2007 *Homosexuality and Liminality in the Gilgamesh and Samuel* (26 n. 36). My conclusion, derived from my analysis of the broader representations of same-sex interactions in the Hebrew Bible and the cultural logic of ancient Israel that was shared with surrounding cultures, is that the legend of David and Jonathan in its context of production is not likely to reference sexual acts, even though it uses a love language that describes deep emotional attachments and that sometimes allows a homoerotic reading (e.g., the imagery of beauty and desire). As I argue in this dissertation, in the absence of the modern Western psychological category of sexuality that focuses on the connections between acts and feelings, the biblical texts do not see the sexual and the affective as necessarily connected.

³⁹ The Vulgate translates *higidil* as “enlarged” (*David autem amplius*). Septuagint adds “to great completion [consummation]” (*hoes sunt eleias megales*). Hans Hertzberg (*I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, 1964) points to the incomprehensible character of this phrase in Hebrew and suggests that the Septuagint version may preserve an older Hebrew text containing the addition that has been lost in later Hebrew manuscripts (171). Ackroyd’s and Johannson’s translations build on Hertzberg’s theory.

The approaches in critical scholarship that are more attentive to the differences between ancient and modern sexual categories and that locate the biblical texts in their cultural context read the narratives of David and Jonathan as instances of homosocial bonds in heroic male couples of warriors and royals typical in the ancient epics and similar to the Gilgamesh Epic or the Iliad (Halperin; Nissinen; Jennings; Ackerman; Heacock; Damrosch; Römer and Bonjour; Schroer and Staubli; Harding). These approaches, nevertheless, produce conflicting arguments as well. Some scholars argue that the relationships in the ancient heroic couples such as David and Jonathan were equal and therefore they could not be sexual: they were based on emotional intimacy rather than on active/passive roles that defined sex in antiquity. For example, Ackerman insists that one cannot make an easy correlation between David and Jonathan and today's gay couples because of diverging conceptualizations of what is sexual and what is not sexual in ancient Israel and in modern Western society (30). Alternatively, Nissinen argues that biblical non-sexual love relationships such as one between David and Jonathan are more comparable with modern gay experience than those texts that explicitly speak of sexual acts, typically as expressions of domination and subjection, often aggressive and violent, such as the biblical Sodom story or the Levitical Holiness Code (56).

The texts that belong to the phallogocentric discourse are preoccupied with the cultural meaning of masculinity, understood in gender-transitive terms,⁴⁰ as something that can be lost when men perform tasks or roles associated with women, first and foremost through respective sexual roles.

⁴⁰ Sedgwick describes gender-transitive understanding of gender identity as a trope of changing one's gender because of sexual choices, due to same-sex acts or desires (*Epistemology* 87-88). See also Butler's discussion of performativity of gender (Butler, *Trouble*). See also works on performativity of gender and its transitive character in the Hebrew Bible (Howard I. Schwartz; Lefkowitz; Jennings), in the Talmud (Boyarín, *Carnal*; Satlow, *Tasting*; Fonrobert, "Regulating"; Kessler, "Rabbinic"; Strassfeld), and in medieval Jewish culture (Magid). Cf. rabbinic understanding of mutability of sex (Strassfeld). See also a theory of one-sex model, which argues that in antiquity the woman was perceived as imperfect man (Laqueur).

Kessler points to the rabbinic construction of gender as “doing” as opposed to the modern Western construction of gender as “being.” Kessler argues that gender in rabbinic culture is not a stable identity; rather, it is defined by performative acts such as mitzvot, halakhic obligations, by what one does with their bodies over who one is (“Perspectives” 63, 72-74). A reversal of gender roles was perceived as a confusion related to different classes. The masculine was associated with the so-called “active” (insertive) sexual role and the feminine associated with the so-called “passive” (receptive) sexual role. As Walsh points out regarding the Levitical verses, “the central issue in both laws is not gender confusion in general, but precisely gender confusion wherein the free male citizen takes on the ‘female’ role” (207–08). The ancient rabbis understood the prohibited practice in terms of active/passive roles, *shokhev/nishkav* (Sifra Kodshim 9.14, 92b; b.Sanhedrin 54b; y.Sanhedrin 7.9, 25a). The concern of the prohibition was receptivity associated with femininity. Male-male intercourse was equated with feminization of men (b.Sanhedrin 55a), which would prompt the rabbis’ contempt (b.Sanhedrin 54b; b.Keritut 3a), similar to Greco-Roman attitudes (Satlow, *Tasting* 197, 213–14).

The phallocentric discourse is grounded in the ancient patriarchal understanding of sex as phallic, hierarchical, and coercive (see, e.g., Halperin, “One Hundred” 28–32). A sexual act was assumed to manifest the man’s right to sexual pleasure and the man’s power, within the context of gender disparity that was fundamental for sexual roles (gender did not necessarily correspond to biological sex). In a cross-sex context, it would be the disparity between the male and the female. In a male same-sex context, it would be the disparity between the “active” male (“the man”) and the “passive” male (“the woman”). In all instances, it would be the disparity between the penetrating subject and the penetrated object (which explains the fact that sex between females was not part of the discourse). As a subject-object interaction, something that one *does*

to someone, it precluded mutuality. The object's desire or consent was not a consideration.

Accordingly, sex in Jewish antiquity, just as in the surrounding cultures, was always defined as what we would call rape today, whether violence was emphasized in the text or not (even in situations where consent was present, it was not required and thus typically not mentioned). As my discussion below demonstrates, biblical and rabbinic legal material and narratives reflect these cultural assumptions.⁴¹

⁴¹ Some biblical and rabbinic texts disapprove of rape of women in specific contexts (e.g., in the stories of Dinah in Genesis 34, the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, or Tamar in 2 Samuel 13), but they never challenge the underlying cultural assumptions. Typically, rape of a woman is emphasized as explanation of later events and as *leading to* violence (between men). What is generally condemned in these representations is damage to the woman's family (men's) honour (that of her father, brothers, husband, master) rather than an act of violence towards a woman *per se*. Indicatively, the Sodom story in Genesis 19 does not condemn Lot's offer of his daughters to be gang raped. Moreover, it presents it as a sign of Lot's virtue, as a heroic act of protecting his male guests by willing to sacrifice his own male honour (alternatively, see concerns about Lot's injustice toward his daughters in Midrash, Tanhuma Vayera 12). In a similar way, the story of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19 shows no ethical concerns about the actions of the Levite who pushes his concubine into the mob outside of the house to be gang raped and murdered. It is only the Benjaminites who deserve punishment in the story, whereas the Levite (not his concubine!) is portrayed as the victim. The rape stories in the Hebrew Bible are not essentially different from other stories of sexual interactions that do not emphasize the fact of coercion but imply it nevertheless (e.g., the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 11-12, which never addresses the fact of Bathsheba's rape by David and, instead, focuses on David's violation of Uriah's rights). This is consistent with the tendency in biblical and rabbinic literature to group rape and seduction together and to apply the category of rape only to pre-marital sex. Thus, rabbinic literature limits the application of the category of rape to unmarried women (e.g., Sifre Deut. 244), because the halakhic concern in case of rape is the compensation to be paid to the woman's father (the bride-price for a virgin), whereas rape of a married woman falls under the category of adultery. The Amoraim discuss rape of a married woman in terms of whether she is permitted to return to her husband (b.Yevamot 33b; b.Nedarim 90b-91a; b.Ketubot 26b-27a; 51b; y.Sotah 4.5, 19d; see Satlow 133-134). The fact of rape itself does not concern the biblical and rabbinic writers, only its implications for men's honour, property rights, or financial interests. The very definition of marriage as purchase of the woman (*kinyan*, see, e.g., b.Kiddushin 2a, with the future husband required to pay a bride-price to the woman's father, see Exod. 22.15-16; Deut. 22.28-29; 1 Sam. 18.25-27; m.Ketubot 3.9) implies sexual coercion. In the biblical depictions of arranged marriages, son and daughter are not always consulted (Gen. 21.21, 24.3-4, 34.4-6, and 38.6; Josh. 15.16; 1 Sam. 18.17-27 and 25.44). The biblical and talmudic laws do not differentiate between marriage and sexual slavery (Ex. 21.7-10 and m.Ketubot 3.2 5). Mishnah references marrying off minor daughters without their consent as an accepted practice (m.Yevamot 13:2). The treatment of women as men's property and objects of exchange (Ex. 20.12-14 and 22.15-17; Lev. 20.10; Num. 30; Deut. 5:18 and 22.22-24; Prov. 6.29-35; m.Ketubot 3.9, 4.1-4, 6.1) excluded the notion of consent. In a similar manner, the biblical narratives that reference marriage (e.g., Jacob's marriage to Rachel and Leah in Genesis 29) rarely mention the women's consent. The modern definitions of consent and rape, defined by experience of the victim, were foreign to the ancient cultures, just as the modern meanings of sex and love are different from their meanings in Jewish antiquity. As Adler points out, when all sex is viewed as an expression of dominance and submission, rape is normalized as a method of acquisition (*Engendering* 136). For a recent discussion of the rape narratives in the Hebrew Bible, see Ehrlich, "Reading."

The phallocentric discourse includes the Priestly Holiness Code (Lev.18.22 and 20.13), which proscribes the act of anal penetration between males (*mishkevei islah*, “lyings down of woman”; my translation), and its rabbinic discussions. It also includes a group of narratives. The biblical narratives in this group are exemplified by the Sodom story in Gen. 19 and the story of a Levite and his concubine in Judg. 19, both of which depict attempted rape of males along with rape of women (attempted or actual) as analogous acts. In the biblical context, male-male penetration typically signifies emasculation as a major instrument of rape, humiliation, and domination. The story of Sodom and the story of the Levite and his concubine refer to this practice in the contexts of war and power struggle between the Israelites and their neighbours (in Gen. 19) or among the Israelite tribes (Judg. 19).⁴² This is similar to other biblical narratives that refer to male-male rape as a symbol of political domination and submission in conflicts between family members, between deities, between gods and humans, between nations, or between other political rivals, such as the story of Noah and his sons (Gen. 9.20-25); God of Israel and the Philistine gods and men (1 Sam. 5); David’s curse of Joab (2 Sam. 3.29); Hanun, king of Ammonites, and David’s courtiers (2 Sam. 10.1-5); David’s naked dance before the Ark (2 Sam. 6); Samson in the Philistine captivity (Judg. 16.21, 25); and the prophetic marriage metaphor (Hos. 1-2; Jer. 2-4; Ezek. 16 and 23).

Rabbinic examples include the midrashim on Potiphar’s attempted rape of Joseph (Gen. Rabbah 86.3, quoted in b.Sotah 13b); Esau, representing Rome, who is said to be “penetrated like a woman” and therefore not deserving to dominate Israel (Gen. Rabbah 63.10); the four

⁴² The narrative in Judges 19 emphasizes that the Levite is from “the hill country of Ephraim” and his concubine is from Bethlehem in Judah (Judg. 19.1). They arrive in Gibeah of Benjamin (Judg. 19.14), because the Levite insists on spending the night in an Israelite town (Judg. 19.12). Their host in Gibeah is originally, just as the Levite, “from the hill country of Ephraim” and he “resided at Gibeah, where the locals were Benjaminites” (19.16). After the Levite’s concubine is raped to death in Gibeah, all of the Israelite tribes go to war against Benjamin in the following chapters, yet Judah leads this war (Judg. 20.18).

kings, Hiram, Nebuchadnezzar, Pharaoh, and Yoash, “who made themselves into gods and [consequently] were penetrated like women” as a “measure for measure” punishment (Tanhuma Parashat Vaera 8); the Pharaoh’s loss of power and being penetrated by “other nations” as punishment for his desire to regain domination over Israelites after their exodus from Egypt, which manifested itself as desire to penetrate the Israelite males (Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael Beshelah; Yalkut Shimoni 249); the punishment of a Judean king Yoash inflicted by the army of Aram who “appointed over him cruel guards who never knew a woman and they would abuse him the way one abuses a woman” (y.Kiddushin 1.7, 6a); a similar punishment of a captive king of Israel by a foreign conqueror who subjected him to rape by “ruffians who had never known woman in their lives” (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Amalek 1); the destruction of Israel by Assyria depicted as rape and the loss of manly honour, the loss of “pride” (“and he will abuse Israel’s pride”), as God’s punishment for disobedience (y.Kiddushin 1.7, 6a); the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar’s attempted rape of Zedekiah, the exiled king of Judah, as a symbol of Nebuchadnezzar’s victory over Judah (b.Shabbat 149b).

The rabbis add sexualized meanings to biblical texts, in the midrashim that imagine male-male rape as instrument of punishment or domination in the contexts of war or other forms of power relations, or in the images of male Israelites who perform the woman’s sexual role as a sign of submission to a greater power, either to God or to a foreign nation. These examples suggest that sex between men, defined as the act of phallic (anal) penetration, had a political meaning of power attached to masculinity, which was devoid of erotic meanings. Typically, these texts demonstrate an anxiety about the confusion of gender roles (Boyarin; Ehrlich; Nissinen; Olyan), which is generally associated with social status (Carr; Nissinen). The Levitical laws reflected a larger concern about confusion of categories that informed the Holiness Code

theology and the priestly concept of holiness as setting up boundaries and separation of categories, establishing a social-theological order (Douglas, *Purity* 53; Douglas, *Leviticus* vi–vii; Levine 243; Boyarin, “Jews” 342, 353; Satlow, *Tasting* 213; Ehrlich 313–91). Rabbinic legal discussions of the Levitical law classified the punishments, worked out legal definitions of the prohibited act (most often, under a term “male lying down,” *mishkav zakhur*), and debated the necessity of precautionary measures that would expand the biblical laws, a “fence around the Torah” (see m.Sanhedrin 7.4; m.Kiddushin 4.14; m.Keritut 1.1; t.Sotah 6.9; Sifra Kodshim 9.14; b.Yevamot 54a-b, 55b; b.Sanhedrin 7.4, 54a-55b, 57b-58a; b.Kiddushin 82a; y.Sanhedrin 7.9, 25a). References to sexual interactions between males in narratives and poetry throughout the biblical canon and in the rabbinic midrash aggadah illustrate the cultural logic within the phallocentric discourse that informs the legal texts. These examples demonstrate that the primary concern of the biblical and rabbinic writers was man’s honour and status. They demonstrate a conceptual link between male anal penetration, castration, cross-dressing, and metaphorical transgendering.⁴³ All of these cases represent the notion of feminization of men by performing a sex role associated with women, by “lyings of woman” (Lev. 18.22 and 20.13). They refer to emasculation as a major signifier of power arrangements, when a man assumed a subordinate, submissive status associated with women in the patriarchal society.

Ancient Judaic texts shared with the surrounding cultures a fear and shame that was attached to the threat of emasculation, which could lead to the loss of a man’s honour and social status if he performed roles associated with women. The biblical and rabbinic texts discussed above

⁴³ Some scholars point to the extent to which heterosexual language can express homoerotic relations or feelings in pre-modern Jewish texts, e.g., in Tanakh (Jennings 134–35, 144, 165, 171–76) or in Kabbalah (Wolfson 331). Wolfson convincingly argues that these heterosexual images serve to appropriate standard Jewish sexual norms even in the moments of radically altering these norms, in the obvious male homoerotic context (332).

reflect the cultural background of contemporaneous Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman society. See Halperin's analysis of the ancient Greek definition of sex as phallic and hierarchical ("One Hundred" 28–32). As Nissinen demonstrates (24–28, 57–73), the biblical texts are strikingly similar to the legal prohibitions and cultural attitudes of the surrounding cultures. For instance, the Levitical prohibition of male-male intercourse is very similar to Persian Zoroastrian laws (*Zend-Avesta*, *Vendidad* 8.31-32), Middle Assyrian Laws, or Roman *Lex Scantinia* law. The biblical narratives that reference sexual acts between males echo Egyptian mythology (such as the Book of the Dead or the myth of Seth and Horus that describes power struggles between gods) or Greek art (such as the Eurymedon vase that depicts a major victory of the Greeks over the Persians in the Battle of Eurymedon in 469 or 466 BCE).⁴⁴

Unlike the modern category of sexuality as a self-defining identity that linked sexual and affective relations, biblical and rabbinic texts did not see these relations as necessarily interconnected. These ancient cultures lacked the modern homo/hetero divide based on object-choice, the modern sexual identities based on feelings and defined as personality types, or the modern category of sexuality that encompasses all spheres of human erotic and sexual experience under one umbrella. As other cultures of their milieu, ancient Judaic texts typically conceptualized sexual acts and feelings as separate categories. Hence, the phallocentric discourse and the affective discourse in these texts appear as unrelated, belonging to separate domains of human experience.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Olyan, however, points to "a rhetoric of inclusivity" of the Hebrew Bible, which did not specify status or other distinctions, in contrast to other ancient cultures ("Male" 191, 195–96). See also works on female homoeroticism in the ancient Roman world (Brooten).

⁴⁵ The ancient rabbis also perceived different sex acts, penetrative and non-penetrative, as belonging to different discursive domains (Satlow, *Tasting* 3). Phallic penetration, either vaginal or anal (m.Yevamot 6.1), was definitional for sexual laws (e.g., the laws of incest or adultery) and strictly regulated, whereas non-penetrative practices, cross-sex or same-sex, were deemed non-sexual and therefore inconsequential legally and socially (Satlow, *Tasting* 243). Hence, in contrast to the modern category of homosexuality, ancient Jewish sources viewed male and female same-

Homoerotic narratives in the Hebrew Bible and in the Talmud or Midrash could coexist with the prohibitions or condemnations of sex between males precisely because the ancient authors and their audiences did not draw a conceptual connection between sexual behaviours and erotic feelings. In contrast to same-sex sexual acts (more precisely, an act of male-male anal penetration), which had a name, such as the biblical *mishkevei isha* (“womanly intercourse,” lit. “lyings of woman”) or the rabbinic *mishkav zakhur* (“intercourse with a male,” lit. “male lying down”),⁴⁶ same-sex feelings were never categorized in the classical Jewish texts.⁴⁷ Unlike modern categories of homosexuality or homoeroticism, there is no term for same-sex desire in either biblical or rabbinic literature, nor in medieval or early modern Jewish traditions. The biblical story of David and Jonathan or the talmudic tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish never appeared in conversations that discussed forbidden same-sex sexual practices, and vice versa. The polarization of the phallocentric and affective discourses characteristic of biblical and rabbinic cultures is evident in the Mishnaic tractate Avot 5.16, in the Tannaitic contrast of the love of David and Jonathan and the rape of Tamar by Amnon (see my discussion of Avot 5.16 in Chapter Three of this dissertation).

sex relationships as conceptually different categories, based on what they perceived as involving phallic penetration or a lack of one (Nissinen 36; Satlow, *Tasting* 192; R. Friedman 377).

⁴⁶ See also a synonymous term, used less frequently, mostly in Palestinian sources, *derekh hazikhrut*, “the way of maleness,” which can refer to anal penetration of a male (t.Yevamot 10.2) or a female (y.Ketubah 3.9, 27d; y.Sanhedrin 7.14, 25c). Satlow suggests that, in the context of Tosefta, this term emphasizes the “maleness” of the penetrated *androgynos*, the androgyne or an intersex person (“They” 18). The use of this term in relation to male-female intercourse, however, points to the maleness of the penetrator, i.e., association of masculinity with insertive sex role. Other rabbinic terms for male-male anal intercourse include *haba al hazekhur*, “to come upon a male” (m.Sanhedrin 7.4, where this term also refers to illicit intercourse with females; cf. *biah*, “intercourse” as a way of acquiring wife in m.Kiddushin 1.1), *nizkak* (y.Sanhedrin 28a), which is also used in cross-sex contexts, or *rava*, “to mount” or “to cover” (b.Yevamot 25a; b.Sanhedrin 9b, 70a; b.Makot 6a), which can also refer to breeding animals or to bestiality (Jastrow 1444; Satlow, “They” 22).

⁴⁷ Cf. Greek and Latin terms that designate male-male anal intercourse such as Greek *pugizein* or Latin *pedico* (see Satlow, “They” 22).

The fundamental ambiguity of the dual representation is evident if one compares two rabbinic traditions: a legal discussion of the prohibition against sex between males in Kiddushin and a depiction of the normative intimacy between study partners in Avot de Rabbi Nathan. An early rabbinic tradition states: “Two bachelors shall not sleep under one cloak (*tallit*⁴⁸); but the sages permit it” (m.Kiddushin 4.14). This mishnah witnesses a debate about the necessity of precautionary measures that would expand the biblical law regarding sex between men by creating a “fence around the Torah” (m.Avot 1.1), or what Sarra Lev calls “the precautionary principle” of rabbinic literature (*Sages*, 12). The sexual assumption of this image of two unmarried men sleeping together and sharing one piece of clothing as a blanket, in Foucauldian terms, puts sex between Jewish males into a discourse. There is a tension within the formulation of this ruling: the repressive force of the interdiction (“shall not sleep”) is juxtaposed with the alternative rabbinic traditions that challenge the prohibitive law (“but the sages permit it”). Other layers of the rabbinic discussion add a normative rationale for the permission: “Israel is not suspected of this [*mishkav zakhur*, male-male sexual intercourse]” (t.Kiddushin 5.10; b.Kiddushin 82a).⁴⁹ These ambivalent legal formulations represent rabbinic anxieties around the Levitical ban on sexual acts between males (Lev. 18.22 and 20.13). The concern here seems to be the possibility of the act of anal penetration between males who, as unmarried men, do not

⁴⁸ Here the term *tallit* is used in a broader meaning as a cover, a large cloak that could serve as a blanket or a bedsheet as well as a garment. In later Jewish tradition, the term *tallit* has become to designate a prayer shawl.

⁴⁹ Cf. other talmudic texts that documented the social reality of same-sex sexual practices among Jewish men within rabbinic academies and study halls (see Chapter Three of this dissertation). This text draws upon the rhetoric of sexual othering, contrasting the alleged Jewish sexual self-control against the alleged Greco-Roman sexual excessiveness. See Satlow on sexual self-control as a signifier of masculinity that Greco-Roman and rabbinic cultures shared (*Tasting* 244). Elsewhere, Satlow points to an analogy with a tradition in t.Eruvin 5.10 that states that the common folk are “not suspected” of violating the agricultural laws of the seventh year, which cannot assume that in fact violations of these laws did not occur (“They” 24-25).

have other sexual outlets.⁵⁰ In contrast, a later tradition makes sleeping together a requirement for male Torah students: “a man should get a companion for himself, to eat with him, drink with him, study Scripture with him, study Mishnah with him, sleep with him, and reveal to him all his secrets, the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of worldly things” (Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3).⁵¹ The prohibited-permitted practice of bed sharing, which in the previous texts caused the rabbis’ suspicion and anxiety, is part of the prescribed closeness between Torah students in this passage.⁵² In the legal discussion of two bachelors sleeping under one cloak, the meaning attached to physical closeness between men moves between sexualizing and de-sexualizing scenarios, and hence between the categories of prohibited and permitted. In Avot de Rabbi Nathan, however, the homosocial physical intimacy that produces the emotional attachment between study partners, with all its erotic possibilities, becomes a requirement for Torah study, and thus a commandment. The transgressive and the normative coexist without being reduced to one another.

⁵⁰ Cf. the sixth-century Rule of St. Benedict, the foundational text of Christian monasticism, which prohibited younger monks to share a bed or have beds beside each other, or to sleep naked (Chapter 22. “How the Monks Are to Sleep”).

⁵¹ See my discussion of this text in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

⁵² The passage in Avot de Rabbi Nathan links the image of intimacy between study partners to a biblical text that describes the advantages of sharing one’s life with a partner: “And how do we know that when his friend corrects him and studies with him, that they will have great reward from their studies? For it says (Eccles. 4.9), ‘Two are better off than one, in that they have greater benefit from their earnings’” (Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3). In contrast to the NJPS translation, which restricts the meaning of the biblical verse to financial gains, the Biblical Hebrew original suggests a broader meaning: *tovim hashnayyim min-haehad asher yesh-lahem sakhar tov ba’amalam*—“Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labour” (my translation). Ecclesiastes in this passage advises that having a companion is better than living alone, as the verses that immediately precede and follow the quotation show (Eccles. 4.7-12). These verses provide examples of the various rewards of sharing one’s life with a companion. This biblical passage describes the benefits of male homosocial bonds analogous to marriage. The image of companionship in Ecclesiastes, which Avot de Rabbi Nathan uses as a biblical proof-text, includes the intimacy of sharing bed (“when two lie together they are warm; but how can he who is alone get warm,” Eccles. 4.11), along with expressions of mutual care and support.

2.3.2 The Text of Terror: The Modern Reception of Leviticus

The previous section shows that the passages in Leviticus are concerned with a specific practice in a specific context, i.e., the act of male-male anal penetration perceived as gender inversion, with the meaning of shame associated with purported emasculation, usually in cases of violence toward enemies. These passages are not concerned with same-sex feelings, desires, attachments, and relationships, or with other sexual practices between men. This was a standard understanding of the Levitical law in rabbinic literature and in later traditional Jewish sources. In the mainstream Jewish culture of the twentieth century, however, there was a popular association of the Levitical injunctions with the modern category of homosexuality. The text of Leviticus became a conventional framework for homophobic sentiments in Jewish communities and contributed to the narrative of cultural conflict between Judaism and homosexuality.⁵³ This ahistorical connection between the Hebrew Bible and modern homophobic discourses became a normative assumption among Jewish religious and academic elite, in both homophobic and anti-homophobic arguments. It also shaped Jewish cultural imagination, including Jewish LGBTQ literature and art. As such, Leviticus is typically perceived as a symbolic text of terror for queer Jews.⁵⁴

The appeal to Leviticus was central in the anti-gay arguments of many conservative religious leaders in North America in the 1970s across Jewish denominations, in response to the organized

⁵³ Leviticus has less significance in similar discussions in a Christian context, because historically Christian theological traditions and biblical scholarship had lesser interest in Jewish legal texts, which were mostly irrelevant to Christian life and often negated as legalistic (Brettler, “Modern” 1977; Magid 114). Instead, Christian conversations around same-sex sexualities focused on the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, due to the specific meanings that this narrative developed in Christian exegetical and theological traditions (the concept of sodomy, in particular) and their implications for Western culture, law, and politics. In contrast, the Sodom story has never gained the same significance in Jewish context because Jewish exegetical tradition largely did not associate this biblical text with same-sex sexuality, emphasizing the theme of hospitality instead.

⁵⁴ See Phyllis Trible’s *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984) that discusses the misogyny of some biblical narratives about women (22 and *passim*). Cf. the acquired meaning of the Sodom story as the “text of terror for queer people” in Christian tradition (Carden 85).

gay and lesbian rights movements in the post-Stonewall era.⁵⁵ Examples include the writings of Solomon Freehof, a leading Reform rabbi (1973 *CCAR Responsa* 115-119), Norman Lamm, a leading figure in American Modern Orthodoxy (“Judaism and the Modern Attitude to Homosexuality,” 1974), and Moshe Feinstein, viewed as the greatest legal authority, *posek*, in Orthodox circles of North America (1976 *Iggerot Moshe*, Orach Hayyim 4.115 and *Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh De’ah* 3.115). These Jewish religious thinkers, in their arguments against acceptance of gay and lesbian Jews in the Jewish communities, represented same-sex desire as essentially un-Jewish or anti-Jewish and understood the Levitical verses as a moral and theological judgment and as a warning against a perceived threat of homosexuals to society. Thus, Feinstein approached same-sex sexual relations in new theological rather than traditional legal terms. In his interpretation of Leviticus, Feinstein discussed same-sex desire instead of sexual practices and defined this desire as an ultimate form of heresy, a desire to rebel against God (*Iggerot Moshe*, Orach Hayyim 4.115). This conceptualization persists in the twenty-first century. For instance, “Declaration on the Torah Approach to Homosexuality,” issued in 2011 by a group of influential Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox leaders, equated same-sex desire with “negative secular influences” and thus deemed it inherently anti-Jewish (or, rather, anti-Torah).

In turn, a struggle with Leviticus played a central role in the pro-gay arguments of more liberal Jewish leaders. For instance, Sanford Ragins, a leading Reform rabbi, in advocating for acceptance of gay and lesbian Jews in 1973, pointed out that “our heritage is not limited to [...] the Book of Leviticus” (45). Bradley Artson, a leading Conservative rabbi, limited the Levitical

⁵⁵ Cf. the anti-homosexual movements of the American New Right and New Christian Right in the 1970s (Stein 115-116, 138-141).

ban to some elements of the modern gay sexual culture such as promiscuity and anonymous sex and excluded from the prohibition more normative relationships based on commitment and monogamy, which, in Artson's view, would uphold the traditional Jewish family values ("Enfranchising the Monogamous Homosexual," 1990; "Gay and Lesbian Jews," 2007). Avi Weiss, a leader of the Open Orthodox movement, rejected the traditionalist reading of Leviticus on the grounds that same-sex love presents no moral threat to society, yet he reiterated his allegiance to the Levitical prohibition ("Why I, as an Orthodox Rabbi, Support Legalizing Same-sex Marriage," 2015). In 2010, some liberal Orthodox rabbis such as Netaniel Helfgot, Avi Weiss, Yosef Blau, and Josh Yuter issued a *Statement of Principles on the Place of Jews with a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community*, signed by approximately two hundred Orthodox rabbis in the United States and Israel, which affirmed the heteronormative ethos of Orthodox communities and the Levitical prohibition, while limiting the latter to the private sphere of personal choices of sexual practices. The *Statement* moved away from the narrative of the cultural dichotomy of Judaism and homosexuality and challenged the homophobic discourses dominant in the contemporary Orthodox world.⁵⁶

The Levitical law, deemed a text of terror for LGBTQ Jews, is often the central subject in Jewish queer literature. As the title of Rebecca Alpert's essay "In God's Image: Coming to Terms with Leviticus," published in the 1989 anthology *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian, Gay,*

⁵⁶ In the past decades, all liberal Jewish denominations and, more recently and to a lesser degree, some progressive Orthodox groups took significant steps towards a more inclusive attitude in relation to LGBTQ Jews. In the second half of the twentieth century, liberal Jewish denominations such as Reform, Reconstructionist, and some Conservative, sometimes after a long and difficult process of internal debates, have adopted more affirming positions towards gender and sexual diversity, such as ordination of LGBTQ rabbis, performing same-sex weddings, or participating in Pride programming. In the new millennium, there were some significant changes in the Orthodox world as well, especially within the Open Orthodox movement, such as ordination of an openly gay man by Daniel Landes in 2019 or Benny Lau's call for acceptance of same-sex couples in 2020. The homophobic discourses, however, still maintain their dominant status in Ultra-Orthodox, many Modern Orthodox, and some Conservative communities.

and Jewish, suggests, many contemporary Jewish queer authors, scholars, and activists see the Levitical discourse as the major point of tension between Jewish and LGBTQ identities, experience, and communities. Many draw analogies between the symbolism of Leviticus and that of the Holocaust. For example, Lev Raphael's short story "Abominations" (1990) draws parallels between the effects of Leviticus and modern hate speech, homophobic and antisemitic alike. In Raphael's story, Leviticus is a symbol of homophobia that has to be rejected by the mainstream Jewish community to allow acceptance of queer Jews. Some Jewish LGBTQ groups reclaim the Levitical discourse as a way of resistance. In 2015, the organizers of *Eighteen:22*, self-described as "a global network of today's emerging and established Jewish LGBTQ and ally visionaries," chose a name that refers to Lev. 18.22, "a verse that has been used against LGBTQ peoples for centuries," with the goal "to transform this verse into a source of power and strength" for those who have been "excluded from the fullness of Jewish life" ("About"). In some Jewish queer works, the reclamation of Leviticus points to the homoerotic possibilities of the biblical law. For example, Daniel Jaffe's short story "The Day I was Caught" (2000) focuses on the eroticism of the biblical prohibition, representing the effects of Leviticus as arousing and proliferating transgressive desires. In Jaffe's story, the text of Lev. 18.22 becomes a site of queer identification. The act of reading of this text in the synagogue turns into a sexual experience, a "memorable encounter with the Leviticus Passage" (Jaffe 49) for a bar mitzvah boy. The sexual awakening of a Jewish gay male adolescent prompts his sudden "understanding" of the biblical text as referring to sex between males, to something the reader recognizes as his own desire. The Torah gets out of the closet, both literally and metaphorically⁵⁷: the traditional synagogue service

⁵⁷ Hebrew has one word for "a closet" (*aron*) and the Ark where Torah scrolls are stored in a synagogue (Aron Kodesh, literally "Holy Closet"). Jaffe's story does not refer to this wordplay explicitly, but the context of this episode implies the symbolism based on this notion.

puts queer sex into a discourse in a Foucauldian manner. The very text of the prohibition in Leviticus arouses the boy's desire and channels his sexual fantasies.

2.3.3 David and Jonathan as Gay *Havruta* Partners: Reception History of 1-2 Samuel

As other biblical texts, 1 and 2 Samuel is a composite literary work that contains different layers added by generations of scribes and redactors. The process of retelling the story of David and Jonathan is already present within the biblical text itself. Due to this fact, as some argue, the meaning of the text is construed by its interpretive and reception history, which also points to the interpretive indeterminacy of the biblical text, which cannot be reduced to a single meaning but rather suggests different possible ways of telling the story of David and Jonathan (Harding 100). The cultural history of the David and Jonathan legend, its meaning in the context of reception since the biblical period onward in Jewish, Christian, and secular Western cultures significantly differs from the meaning of this legend in the context of production, from its original historical and literary background in ancient Israel. As discussed earlier, in the Hebrew Bible the narratives of David and Jonathan emphasize socially approved homosocial bonds that represent emotional intimacy and commitment between men, sometimes through non-phallic homoeroticism. The biblical David and Jonathan narrative employs the motif of heroic love, popular in the ancient epics, as a literary tool that serves to support the Davidic dynasty's claim to royal authority. In the context of reception, this narrative, taken out of its biblical context, has evolved in European culture as a model for love between men.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ For a detailed description of the homoerotic reception of the David and Jonathan legend in European culture, see Harding's *The Love of David and Jonathan*. Harding notes: "The idea that the relationship between David and Jonathan was sexual has, in fact, become commonplace, so much so that the very mention of David and Jonathan can be shorthand for a gay relationship. Such uses of the David and Jonathan trope to some extent discard the biblical context in which the two characters originally appeared. This arguably problematizes the notion that David and Jonathan are any longer 'biblical' characters at all, since they are detached from their 'original' biblical context and have ceased to be controlled by it" (3).

Some trends in the reception history of the story of David and Jonathan in European Christian culture, especially in the modern period, have established a particular tradition of homoerotic readings of David's and Jonathan's relationship. Boswell describes the European Christian use of the images of David and Jonathan as a biblical equivalent of the Greek myth of Zeus and Ganymede in representation of passionate attachments between men (what Boswell calls "gay conventions") in the High Middle Ages (252, 299). Harding argues that the tradition of homoerotic reading of the David and Jonathan legend has evolved in association with classical male friendships such as Achilles and Patroclus that were popular in Greco-Roman literature and that were typically interpreted in Greco-Roman culture homoerotically, as pairs of lovers, often in light of the Athenian pederastic traditions, for example, in the writings of Aeschylus, Aeschines, and Plato, or in the lists of "pairs of friends," *paria amicorum*, such as the one in Cicero's *De amicitia* (15). Medieval Christian writings reclaimed this classical tradition of male friendship but reconfigured it in Christian terms, turning David and Jonathan into a biblical equivalent to Greco-Roman heroic couples, perceived as more appropriate in the Christian settings (Harding 283). In later periods, the scriptural authority of the David and Jonathan narrative, already understood homoerotically through this literary tradition, gave religious sanction to numerous literary texts celebrating male-male love. The relationship between David and Jonathan also became an important metaphor for romantic friendship between women in the late eighteenth-century novels, signifying a love that surpassed the normative constrictions of heterosexual marriage (Faderman 106–07). In the nineteenth century, the David and Jonathan narrative was already established as a well-known model of same-sex love due to the influence of Greek and Latin texts, the rise of biblical scholarship outside the Church, and the Romantic movement. This can be seen in Byron's letters (1807) or in "Davidean friendship" of the Ladies

of Llangollen. With the rise of the modern category of homosexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the images of David and Jonathan played a significant role in the early homosexual movements. These images constituted a code for same-sex desire and a shorthand for homosexuality in the Victorian homosexual underground movement and among the Uranian poets who represented a homosexual literary movement in England of the turn of the twentieth century, such as Oscar Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, John Addington Symonds, and Edward Carpenter, as well as in other European literatures, such as Andre Gide's tragedy *Saul* (1896) in France or Rainer Maria Rilke's 1908 poems in Germany. David and Jonathan were referenced as classical examples of homosexuals in the 1900 writings of Magnus Hirschfeld, a pioneer of modern sexuality studies and a leader of the early homosexual movement in Germany.

In more recent periods, the story of David and Jonathan has acquired a more specific meaning as a representation of gay relationships in Christian and Jewish LGBTQ communities, including canonical works of gay male literature. The images of David and Jonathan can be found in the writings and speeches of Oscar Wilde, including his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which contributed to setting "the terms of a modern homosexual identity" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 49), and in Wilde's famous self-defence at his 1895 trial for homosexuality. In 1956, James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*, which has become a canonical work of gay male literature, reworked the biblical David and Jonathan as modern gay lovers, wherein David was American and Giovanni was Italian. In 1998, Robert Drake's *The Gay Canon* and Byrne Fone's *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature* included the narratives of David and Jonathan as foundational texts of the gay literary heritage. The images of David and Jonathan remain significant symbols in today's gay popular culture, Christian and secular alike, as can be seen in the historical novel *The Prince's Psalm* (2016) by Eric Shaw Quinn, who had written

novelizations of the TV series *Queer as Folk*, or the musical *Beloved King* (2020) by Jade Sylvan.

Modern queer culture makers often use the images of David and Jonathan in opposition to modern homophobic discourses that claim biblical foundations by referring to the Levitical law or to the Sodom narrative. The trope of David and Jonathan was “significant to the U.S. LGBTQ community in its efforts to create a shared homosexual past” (Milo 23). In the U.S. homophile periodicals of the 1950s and 1960s, such as *ONE* and the *Mattachine Review*, the story of David and Jonathan was represented as a love story encompassing homosexuality and homosociality (Milo 11). Milo notes that “the story of David and Jonathan was used to challenge the moral condemnation of homosexuality, but it also had the additional function of connecting homosexuality and homosociality to a past, which was often done while ignoring historical and cultural specificities, thus presenting homosexual relations in an ahistorical conceptual framework” (12). Tom Horner’s book *Jonathan Loved David* (1978) represented the story of David and Jonathan as “the evidence and arguments for the acceptance of homosexuality in the Bible” (11–12), which, according to Horner, could serve to oppose the legal decisions based on the laws of Leviticus or the story of Sodom.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is interesting to note Harding’s argument that the intersection of male homosociality, learning, and eros produced the new meaning of the David and Jonathan legend as a symbol of same-sex love in Western culture and as a founding text for today’s gay literary canon (287-290). As Harding demonstrates, the perception of this biblical narrative in homoerotic terms has developed within the tradition of reading David and Jonathan alongside ancient Greek and Roman examples of male homosocial friendships, on the one hand, and within the homosocial educational settings of the classical and biblical studies, on the other

hand. Educational settings that conflated scholarship and homosocial male bonds in the context of relationships between students or between students and their tutors (such as Oxford Hellenism in the nineteenth-century England) contributed to the creation of a positive heritage of same-sex desire that combined the biblical and the Greco-Roman models (Harding 307). As well, Roden suggests that the committed friendships and tutor-student relationships in the religious and academic homosocial environment of that period “may be deemed a queer space, a place where same-sex attachments could flourish without society’s policing of deviance” (23). This environment produced works of the prominent gay culture makers and advocates for homosexual rights who appealed to the images of David and Jonathan as positive examples of same-sex love in the Western cultural tradition, such as Oscar Wilde and E. M. Forster. Forster’s novel *Maurice* (1914; published after the author’s death in 1971) depicted love between two upper-class Cambridge students, Clive and Maurice. As a scholar brought up in the Christian environment, Clive “searched the Scriptures for support” of his sexual desires and discovered David and Jonathan, along with the “disciple that Jesus loved” (Forster 59–60).

The history of traditional Jewish biblical exegesis lacks explicitly homoerotic interpretations of the David and Jonathan story.⁵⁹ Most likely, secular Jewish culture adopted the Western tradition that associated this biblical narrative with male-male love in the second half of the nineteenth century, as can be seen in the paintings and drawings of Simeon Solomon (1854–1856) or in Mendele Moikher Sforim’s novel *Benjamin the Third* (1878). In the early twentieth century, Mordechai Jirí Langer referred to David’s and Jonathan’s “loving friendship”⁶⁰ (*ahavat*

⁵⁹ The homoerotic Hebrew poetry of eleventh-century Spain includes a poem of Isaac Ibn Mar Shaul that compares the male beloved to David, yet it does not mention Jonathan (Sienna 52–53).

⁶⁰ Nur translates it as “comrade-love” similar to the German Männerbund, which, as Nur argues, was Langer’s source adapted in Hebrew, in an effort to create a Jewish equivalent of the European homosexual movement (140).

re'a) as part of his Jewish homosexual legacy (Halper 214) and compared his own homoerotic poems to David's lament for Jonathan (Sienna 265–67). In the second half of the twentieth century, the David and Jonathan tradition was already integral part of Jewish gay and lesbian life. The first attempt to start a gay synagogue, which met briefly in November-December 1970, was called "The House of David and Jonathan."⁶¹ At the turn of the new millennium, the images of David and Jonathan play an increasingly significant role in Jewish LGBTQ culture. Examples include the rituals for Jewish same-sex weddings designed by Rachel Adler in 1998 (*Engendering* 169); queer revisions of the Orthodox tradition such as Steven Greenberg's book (2004); works of fiction such as the texts of Stephen Schecter (1996), Michael Lassel (2000), Andrew Ramer (2010), or Gary Levinson (2014); or visual art such as the photographs of Adi Nes (2004) or Sarah Rosen and Tom Stokes (2017).⁶² The political and religious significance of the David and Jonathan tradition in contemporary Jewish LGBTQ life is evident from appealing to the example of David and Jonathan in advocating gay rights by Yael Dayan, an Israeli parliamentarian, in the Knesset in 1993, which caused heated protests of members of Orthodox and right-wing parties (Block). This context partially explains the use of the David and Jonathan imagery in the modern literary works discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation, such as the texts of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Jyl Lynn Felman, Maggie Anton, and K. David Brody. These and other writers often represent David and Jonathan as gay *havruta* partners, sometimes conflating the images of David and Jonathan with the images of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish.

⁶¹ Noam Sienna pointed to this fact in an e-mail note to the author on July 21, 2019.

⁶² See also a gay Jewish Facebook group "David Loved Jonathan" created in October 2012. For examples outside of the United States and Canada, see Rafael Bán Jacobsen's novel *Uma leve simetria* (2009) set in a Brazilian Jewish community or the drawings of Felix de Leon, a Mexican gay artist.

2.4 The Homosocial Continuum through a Queer Lens: The Ethics of Queer

Reading of Traditional Images in Jewish Contexts

As a historical or even contemporary practice, *havruta* is produced and structured by a patriarchal society. Male homosocial relations that shaped the intimacy of traditional Jewish study partnership were based on sexist and misogynistic cultural assumptions and social structures and thus participated in the oppression of women. They were also predicated on heteronormativity and on the assumption of the non-sexual character of these relationships. Historically, these relations signified sexual repression, which in the modern period often translated into homophobic attitudes. Given all these, how queer can these homosocial intimacies be? Are the homosociality of *havruta* and the traditional homoeroticism of study partnership worth reclaiming as queer despite their oppressive effects? If they are, then what are the ethics of this reclamation? How can one appropriate traditional images of Jewish homosociality without misrepresenting or idealizing them?

The reclamation of older tropes and mainstream traditions for new contexts is an important strategy of queer culture-making. Queer theorists have written on queer relation to non-LGBTQ culture, exploring the ways certain mainstream cultural productions respond to queer erotic or aesthetic sensibilities, or allow reading through a queer lens (Sedgwick, *Tendencies*; Butler, *Bodies*; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Miller; Halperin, *How*; Allan). Miller and Halperin discuss the ways in which queer subjectivity can be realized in identifications with certain images of mainstream culture, for example, the Broadway musicals of the 1940s-1950s, which “simultaneously hide and manifest queer desire,” realizing it without denoting it (*How* 12,

108).⁶³ The queer modes of historical or cultural reclamation parallel a Jewish cultural move of returning and reimagining, “the Jewish search for a usable past” (Roskies 1). The construction of the present through reworkings of the images of the past, retrieving the lost, fallen “by the wayside” moments of the past can reshape Jewish collective memory in meaningful ways (Yerushalmi 101). Queer Jewish models of intertextuality, as Weiman-Kelman argues, require a backward continuity, “queer expectancy,” “looking back, to, and through the past’s unfulfilled desires” (xii, xxviii).

The modern Jewish queer method of reclamation—linkage, justification, continuity—might at the same time lead to overreliance on the earlier textual traditions, to mystifying and mythifying the past, to superimposing modern concerns upon the traditional texts, or to adjusting the past according to today’s needs. It has a risk of erasing or simplifying the difficult moments of the past, ignoring differences between culturally specific contexts, and ultimately replacing the traditionalist fantasy of the past with another, queer fantasy of the past. It also risks reproducing the exclusionary cultural assumptions that underlie the older tropes and reinforcing their oppressive effects. Queer identification with male homosocial relationships that are characteristic of traditional Jewish intellectual life thus comes hand in hand with the need to dis-identify from heteronormativity, androcentrism, sexism, and misogyny that underlie these relationships.

Historically, *havruta*, as a male study pair, was part of the social system that excluded women and other genders deemed non-male from Jewish intellectual life. Since the rabbinic period onward, the study of religious texts bears the highest social and religious value in traditional Judaism, one that conditions the positions of power and authority and the very process of making

⁶³ Cf. works on queer relation to U.S. Latine cultural productions (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 3, 14) or Latin American literature (Allan 147–67).

Jewish culture and tradition. This makes the exclusion of women from these activities particularly significant in preserving male dominance. The very possibility of close intimate bonds between men in Jewish intellectual life was a product of sexual control, segregation, and discrimination, protecting heteromascuine privilege and male power. Accordingly, traditional Jewish references to same-sex relationships typically privileged male experience and ignored female sexualities, which often continues to inform discussions about Jewish tradition and sexual diversity today. Scholars note the negative effects of male homosocial structures of Jewish learning on women (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 29). In the larger context, feminist scholars point to the negative effects of male homosocial relationships on women in Western culture. They critique homosocial relations because of the extent to which they are used to maintain phallogentric power and male domination. For example, Rubin discusses the role that “traffic in women,” usually through the institution of marriage, historically played in relationships between men in patriarchal societies, establishing male kinship as a system of power and oppression of women (173-76). Sedgwick demonstrates that normative representation of male homosocial bonds and their implicit homoeroticism in Western culture typically served to support and reinforce compulsory heterosexuality, homophobia, and oppression of women (*Between* 16), often through “the erotic triangle” (*Between* 27) in which a woman mediated a homosocial relationship between men, for example, as a common trope in the English novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The concept of homosocial continuum that was developed by feminist scholars, queer theorists, and historians of sexuality, mostly in the studies of relationships between women, can provide a helpful theoretical framework in studying the *havruta* intimacy and its homoerotic or queer possibilities. Although there are historical differences between male and female

homosociality as the “articulations and mechanisms of the enduring inequality of power between women and men” (Sedgwick, *Between* 5), applying studies of women’s homosocial homoeroticism helps to break from the normative phallogentric definitions of masculinity and to recover queer male sensibilities to which *havruta* intimacies can respond. There is substantive research on female homosocial homoeroticism and eroticized intellectualism that emphasizes the continuum of homosocial structures and homoerotic desire, for example, the works of Adrienne Rich, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman, or Sara Ahmed. Rich recalls a conflation of intellectual and erotic bonds in the homosocial environment of the Women’s Liberation movement: “the passion of debating ideas with women was an erotic passion for me” (“Split” 121). Rich introduces the idea of the erotic as a continuum, a range of experience, what she calls the “lesbian continuum,” which is “unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself,” but rather manifests itself in “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, and in the sharing of work” (“Compulsory” 51–53). This understanding is also accepted in Jewish feminist thought. For example, Judith Plaskow, building on Audre Lorde’s works, understands the erotic as passion that includes not only sexual, but also emotional and intellectual components (196). Some queer theorists, however, critique Rich’s concept of lesbian continuum for oversexualizing or undersexualizing homosocial relationships. Sedgwick points out that the concept of the continuum of homosocial desire, male or female, can unnecessarily sexualize all forms of same-sex bonding while overlooking nuances and degrees between them (*Epistemology* 36–37, 87–88). In contrast, Ahmed points to Rich’s “underplay of the sexual aspects of lesbian desire” in favour of the social attachments between women. Ahmed argues that “lesbian desire is contingent as a way of reflecting on the relation between sexual and social contact” since “[t]o be oriented sexually toward women as women affects other things that we

do” (*Queer* 103). Rethinking Rich’s concept of lesbian continuum, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg introduces the concept of “female homosocial continuum,” a continuum of “a love that was at the same time both emotional and sensual” (71–73). In her study of homosocial homoerotic relationships between women in nineteenth-century America, Smith-Rosenberg argues that these relationships did not allow an easy correlation with the modern categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Smith-Rosenberg suggests that “the essential question is not whether these women had genital contact and can therefore be defined as homosexual or heterosexual” (59), but how we can understand these relationships on their own terms. The historical accounts of female homosociality revealed a continuum of emotional and physical intimacy and commitment, “the relationship along the spectrum of human emotions between love, sensuality, and sexuality” (Smith-Rosenberg 74), which was contingent upon specific cultural norms and arrangements (Smith-Rosenberg 75–76). Smith-Rosenberg writes that the nineteenth century was “a cultural environment that permitted a great deal of freedom in moving across this spectrum” and that “the supposedly repressive and destructive Victorian sexual ethos may have been more flexible and responsive to the needs of particular individuals than those of the mid-twentieth century” (76). Smith-Rosenberg calls for moving away from “[t]he twentieth-century tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviance and normality, genitality and platonic love” (59).

The studies of female homosocial homoeroticism, while demonstrating the ways female homosociality enabled affective, erotic, and romantic relationships between women outside of heteronormative marriage, also contribute to rethinking male sexualities. For instance, as Smith-Rosenberg did regarding female homosocial relations, Muñoz critiques definitions of gay male sexuality based on empirical evidence of sexual intercourse. Muñoz categorizes these reductive

definitions as heterosexist “blindness to...the different economies of desires” (*Disidentifications* 59). Muñoz links this reductive discourse to the normative category of masculinity as a “cultural imperative to enact a mode of ‘manliness’ that is calibrated to shut down queer possibilities and energies” (*Disidentifications* 57-58). The works on female and male homosociality can help in understanding of the variety of masculinities and male sexualities. They can also help in understanding the homosocial *havruta* intimacy as a queer relationship, regardless of the gender of those involved.

Smith-Rosenberg’s research precedes Michel Foucault’s seminal first volume of *History of Sexuality* that analyzes historical attitudes toward male same-sex practices and desires. Foucault challenges the binary opposition of sexual freedom, generally attributed to the post-Stonewall era, and sexual repression typically attributed to the Victorian era. Foucault identifies a shift in conceptualization of sex in Western society from acts to desire, from the pre-modern notion of sodomy, a category of forbidden acts, a “temporary aberration,” to the modern category of the homosexual as “a species,” “a personage,” characterized “less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility” (*History* 43). Foucault tracks this shift to the newly emerged medical discourses of the turn of the twentieth century, such as the article on “contrary sexual feeling” of German psychiatrist Karl Friedrich Otto Westphal, published in 1870 (*History* 19–20, 43). This and other works in psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and sexology of the turn of the last century, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Sexual Psychopathy* (1886), categorized same-sex desire as a mental disorder or developmental pathology that defines one’s personality. This definition became a central element in the modern construction of hetero-homosexual binarism,

which was centered on sexual feelings and included both male and female sexualities.⁶⁴

According to Foucault, the binary opposition of repression and liberation neglects the productive effects of the previous sexual discourses that lacked the category of sexuality (*History* 82–86).

Foucault suggests that the Victorian repressive law cannot be reducible to its negative effects (*History* 10, 12) because it functioned as “production of sexuality rather than repression of sex” (*History* 114). This law produced and proliferated the very sexual discourses it prohibited (Foucault, *History* 12–13). Hence, its effects “may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification” (Foucault, *History* 11). Putting sex into discourse, even a prohibitive one, resulted in increasing incitement and the dissemination of “polymorphous sexualities” (Foucault, *History* 12–13, 18), the pleasures that transcended the phallocentric definition of sexuality. Foucault’s discussion of the repressive hypothesis suggests a way to understand the historical development of sexual categories and experiences not in terms of a repression/resistance binary and the triumphalist idea of a linear progress from oppression to liberation, but as culturally specific phenomena where the repressive law often generates and proliferates the sexual discourses that it is supposed to repress. Boyarin, applying Foucault’s framework, argues that the absence of categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the talmudic culture allowed greater normative possibilities for the homoerotic (“Jews” 354) and “a much greater scope for forms of male intimacy” (*Unheroic* 17). In this sense, the yeshiva and *havruta* could be viewed as a cultural field that produces and shapes particular forms of same-sex desire and intimacy. Indeed, works that have explored traditional Jewish queerness in various cultural and literary contexts, such as the works of Boyarin, Halper, Magid, Satlow, Seidman,

⁶⁴ In a similar way, in that period the traditional image of Jewish difference as religious-theological difference was redefined as medical pathology, linked to the body, gender, and sexuality, which still had ideological implications (Gilman 2).

Roth, or Wolfson, point to evidence that same-sex religious, cultural, and social practices of traditional Jewish communities can sexualize human connections in distinct ways because the modern category of sexual identity in these communities is absent or not emphasized. This can fulfil or construct some particular aspects of same-sex desire that are not recognized in modern secular gay or queer culture.

Smith-Rosenberg's and Foucault's works were followed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of a continuum between male homosociality and homosexuality in English literature, where the "homosocial," while lacking direct genital contact, is often the potentially erotic (*Between* 1–2, 66). Sedgwick points out that "what counts as the sexual is historically, culturally, and socially variable" (*Between* 15) and that the connections between genital and nongenital aspects of our lives and relationships are interrelated to forms and distribution of power (*Between* 26–27; *Epistemology* 48). As an example from my discussion earlier in this chapter, sensuality without a phallus, without intercourse, was not viewed meaningfully as sex in the dominant pre-modern discourses. Sedgwick argues that in our society this continuum of male homosocial desire—the relation between sexual and nonsexual male bonds—is radically disrupted and dichotomized (*Between* 1–3), while, as Smith-Rosenberg's research had demonstrated, female homosocial and homosexual bonds are less dichotomous and more continuous (Sedgwick, *Between* 3–5). This asymmetry between men's and women's experiences points to the "homophobic division of the male homosocial spectrum" (Sedgwick, *Between* 134). Seidman, however, notes that, in contrast to the images of male homosocial desire in English literary formations that Sedgwick analyzes, homophobia was generally absent in male homosociality of traditional Ashkenazic culture depicted in the works of Jewish writers (*Plot* 312 n.22).

Jonathan Ned Katz offers an account of male-male intimate relationships in nineteenth-century America, “in the world before the homosexual-heterosexual hypothesis, the universe before that great sexual divide” (x). Katz describes various and complex forms of interplay between the sexual and the affective, with a “surprising variety of physical and sometimes sensual modes of relating among male friends” (6) and “different ways of producing affection and pleasure” (338). As Katz shows, many men in the nineteenth-century America adapted language of romantic love and friendship available to them to affirm their sexual desires and relationships with other men (332). As Katz observes, homosocial intimacy participated in the construction of modern sexual love and in the formation of a broader definition of the sexual (ix). Katz rejects ahistorical assumptions that require evidence of the sexual to categorize a same-sex relationship as homosexual (335–36). Instead, Katz argues that the social “practice of love and friendship between men” that “sometimes included the sexual” (337) fell outside the nineteenth-century ideological distinction between romantic love that excluded the sexual and sexual desire or acts of sodomy, the distinction that could be traced to the Christian dualism of soul and body, the spiritual and the sexual (6, 331, 333–34, 351). Since the sexual was defined narrowly, in terms of procreation, as phallic penetrative intercourse (similar to the Levitical definition), any other forms of intimacy were not perceived as including sexual desire (Katz 334), hence “love, however passionate and physical, could flourish between men and between women without raising suspicions of illicit intercourse” (Katz 336).⁶⁵

One can speak of a variety of traditional Jewish forms of normativity that in many ways differs from the Western forms of sexual and gender normativity. In these complex intersecting relationships between gender roles, homosocial structures, marital contexts, and sexual practices,

⁶⁵ See also Heather Love for a discussion and review of literature on modern queer friendship (74–81).

homoerotic feelings or same-sex intimacies often play a significant role as another form of traditional Jewish normativity. As Avishai points out, Jewish queer worldmaking draws on the pluralistic and ambiguous character of traditional Jewish gender and sexual regimes, hence Jewish “symbols, sensibilities, and mythologies” help queer Jews “articulate new scripts” for “visible, legible, palatable, and livable lives” (xii) and transform “everyday spaces, practices, and discourses” (5). At the same time, the religious language and sometimes nationalist rhetoric and heteronormative frameworks of this queer reclamation of Jewish tradition can be problematic, translating into homonormativity and homonationalism that reinforce the dominant structures of oppression and run counter to the values of equality and inclusion (Avishai 4-6).

Daniel Boyarin argues that the traditional Jewish value of soft, “effeminate” scholarly masculinity of the yeshiva student resisted the dominant European ideology of aggressive phallic masculinity (*Unheroic* 23-24). Boyarin discusses the tradition of Jewish gender and sexual difference associated with Jewish intellectual life, which begins with the talmudic resistance to Roman models of masculinity (for example, evident in the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a) and persists into the traditional Ashkenazic image of the yeshiva student, the *Yeshiva-Bokhur*, who embodies the values of intellectualism and gentleness. The Torah study was “the primary marker of the difference” between Jewish men and non-Jewish men in Western society (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 26). The gentleness and delicacy (*Edelkayt*) of the Torah scholar was a Jewish model of masculinity that was “openly resistant to and critical of the prevailing ideology of ‘manliness’ dominant in Europe” (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 23). According to Boyarin, this traditional Jewish model of scholarly masculinity—soft, sensitive, effeminate—is radically different from the normative Western manliness that privileges toughness, physical strength, and aggressiveness. In contrast to the images of philosophers in Greco-Roman culture

or monks in Christian society, the *Yeshiva Bokhur* in Jewish culture was not seen as desexualized or asexual (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 26). Indeed, the Jewish “scholarly ideal male” (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 24) was at once feminized (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 26) and eroticized, fit for Torah and for women (Boyarin, *Unheroic* xx). Boyarin suggests that this cultural resistance to, and subversion of, modern Western conventions of masculinity and male sexuality ended when Jewish society adopted European gender and sexual norms during the nineteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) and, later, in the Zionist project of the turn of the last century (*Unheroic* 27–28). More recently, Jay Michaelson, building upon Boyarin’s argument, contrasts the traditional Jewish ideal of soft scholarly masculinity against some of the erotic conventions of the modern secular gay culture (“Da’at” 211).

Seidman traces the continuity of this Jewish queerness in, and after, the embrace of European conventions, in the works of modernist Jewish writers of the early and mid-twentieth century, such as S. An-sky, S.Y. Agnon, Sholem Asch, Dvora Baron, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Seidman argues that these writers employed the queer potential of the traditional Jewish homosocial structures, first and foremost the patterns of Torah study in the yeshiva, to resist the modern Western bourgeois norms of romance, marriage, and sexuality.⁶⁶ Seidman notes that “Jewish ‘queerness’ shows up in this larger system not only in the differences by which traditional Jewish masculinity and femininity were constructed and performed but also in the ways that such erotically charged homosocial spheres as the yeshiva and the Hasidic court were sites for the construction of heterosexual marriages” (*Plot* 18). Seidman insists on the importance of a “thick” description of Jewish queerness, one from inside Jewish culture rather than through “the

⁶⁶ Jonathan Freedman argues that An-sky’s and Singer’s attention to non-normative sexualities reflected the influence of the larger topos of decadence and cultural decline in European modernism (21–22).

pathologizing lens of central European sexual stigmatization,” thereby pointing out that “it is within this thick Jewish context that Jewish masculinity might be calibrated with Jewish gender roles more generally, as well as with sexual practices, marital structures, kinship systems, varieties of heteronormativity, and shifting modes of patriarchy” (*Plot* 16). Seidman writes about “the traditional Ashkenazic distribution of sexual energies between the two connected spheres of a partially eroticized homosociality and a partially deeroticized heteronormativity” (*Plot* 18). In traditional Jewish life, “homosocial desire has a far broader range of significations than a discourse grounded in minoritarian sexual orientation can begin to recognize” (Seidman, *Plot* 287). In a Foucauldian sense, the homosocial spaces of the yeshiva or Hassidic court served to counter “the sexual attractions of modernity,” yet they “did so by providing their own sexual attractions” (Seidman, *Plot* 266). Seidman shows that “the homoeroticism of sexual segregation [...] was part of the literary critique of traditional life from the very outset of the Haskalah project” (*Plot* 274), which took a new turn in the works of modernist Jewish writers of the early and mid-twentieth century, such as *An-sky*, S.Y. Agnon, Sholem Asch, Dvora Baron, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Seidman argues that Jewish writers in the twentieth century discovered erotic pleasures in the sexual segregation of traditional Jewish society, including the eroticism of Torah learning, which earlier generations, the proponents of Haskalah in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had seen as repressive social structures (*Plot* 18). In their resistance to Western bourgeois gender and sexual norms, these writers re-discovered the queer spaces of traditional Judaism. Seidman points out that “the attractions of homosocial spaces for literary characters, and the attractions of a sexually segregated world for its readers and viewers, are simply incoherent or invisible in worldviews dominated by bourgeois ideologies or their queer responses” (*Plot* 274).

The queer valence, present in classical Jewish texts and in traditional patterns of studying these texts, does not constitute homoeroticism as a uniform narrative or as a coherent element of a larger narrative. The queer possibilities in reading classical Jewish texts could be better understood in light of the Foucauldian theory of polyvalence of discourses. This theory regards discourse as never unified or fixed, but rather as “a series of discontinuous segments, not uniform nor stable, multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault, *History* 100). Applying this theory to Jewish texts, one can say that the queer kernel of Jewish tradition shows a play of multiple discontinuous segments that lend themselves to certain modes of reception as strategies of self-understanding and self-fashioning by contemporary queer Jews. Recuperating the queer potential of *havruta* offers a promise of an affective community, one that can realize a continuum of religious, intellectual, and erotic sensibilities, supported by social structures that are available in traditional Judaism and that are unavailable elsewhere.

Chapter Three. Homoerotic Images of Torah Scholars and Study

Partnership in Rabbinic Literature

This chapter looks at the images of study partnership in rabbinic literature. These images constitute an integral part of the rabbinic enterprise of Torah study. The chapter claims that the ancient rabbis constructed the arena of Jewish learning in ways that can be read as homoerotic and that they introduced the trope of homoerotic study partnership in Jewish cultural imagination. The general significance of study partnership in rabbinic culture lies in the idea of acquisition of wisdom through a relationship, the view of Torah study as a social and intimate activity. This chapter contextualizes the rabbinic constructions of homoerotic study partnership by examining their connections to the larger theme of rabbinic homoeroticized intellectualism and to the homosocial continuum of rabbinic culture, with its intersections of male homosocial settings of Torah study and the ideal of scholarly masculinity. This chapter investigates the cultural contexts of these rabbinic discourses within the ancient Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman milieu that lacked the modern category of sexuality. In that cultural milieu, intimacies between men were typically associated with normative patterns of male homosocial bonds, such as heroic friendship or pederastic mentorship. These cultures generally assumed conceptual connections between eros and knowledge or virtue.⁶⁷

Rabbinic literature includes two major sets of texts, Tannaitic and Amoraic. The early rabbinic traditions that comprise the Tannaitic corpus (Mishnah and Tosefta) were produced in Rabbinic Hebrew in Roman Judea/Palestine mostly in the second century CE. The subsequent Hebrew-Aramaic discussions of later generations of the ancient rabbis form the Amoraic corpus,

⁶⁷ See, e.g., works that draw an analogy between the Greek notion of *eros*, which often included many forms of desire that merged sexual, intellectual, artistic, and spiritual types of intimacy, and the biblical term *da'at* that can refer to both knowledge and intimacy (Carr 9; Michaelson, "Da'at" 208, 210–11).

the Palestinian Talmud (*Yerushalmi*) and Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*), completed by the rabbis in Roman Palestine approximately in the fourth and fifth centuries CE and in the Persian Sasanian Empire (“Babylonia” in Jewish tradition) approximately in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, respectively.

Midrash constitutes a distinctive method and genre of rabbinic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Midrashim, halakhic (legal) and aggadic (non-legal),⁶⁸ exegetical and homiletic, could be found in the Talmudim, which often quote earlier midrashic traditions and incorporate them into the contexts of their discussions, and in midrashic compilations mostly composed between the third and the tenth centuries CE. Some collections of Midrash developed almost contiguously with the Bible, and some developed later, around the same time ranges as the tannaitic material. The earliest collections of midrashim, such as Genesis Rabbah or Song Rabbah, might have been edited in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, and the latest anthologies, such as Midrash ha-Gadol or Ein Ya’akov, assembled between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The amoraic part of the Talmudim, the Gemara, quotes Midreshei Halakha (legal derivations), Midreshei Aggadah (aggadic derivations), and a number of *baraitot*—tannaitic material akin to *mishnayot* that were missed when the *mishnayot* were being collected for redaction. It is not easy (and often impossible) to identify the original source and date of an individual midrash since both the Talmud and midrashic collections often used older and newer sources indiscriminately.

The redaction of the Tannaitic aggadic tractate Avot is usually attributed to the second century CE (contemporaneous with the redaction of the Mishnah) or later, although some of its sayings might go back as early as the second century BCE. The dating of Avot de Rabbi Nathan, a commentary to Avot, remains unclear. Whereas some scholars locate it in the Tannaitic period,

⁶⁸ The distinction between Halakhah (Law) and Aggadah (lore, narratives, homilies, etc.) applies to the entire rabbinic literature. The Talmud often includes aggadic material amid legal discussions.

in the second-third centuries CE, others consider it a late document and date its composition or final redaction to the post-talmudic period, in the seventh or eighth century.

The rabbinic sources discussed in this chapter include Tannaitic and Amoraic traditions that reference intimacy of Torah study, such as *m.Avot* and *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*, which discuss the proper conduct of Torah scholars, or the Rabbi Yohanan cycle in *b.Bava Metsia*, which includes homoerotic images of the sages and the story of an intimate relationship between two scholars, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish. I also discuss other traditions in the Talmudim and Midrashim that relate to rabbinic marriage metaphor or to rabbinic images of homoerotic intellectualism.

In this chapter, I identify three major sets of rabbinic traditions that contribute to the construction of study partnership as a homoerotic relationship: (a) rabbinic representations of study pair as an institutionalized form of male-male intimacy through prescribed non-sexual closeness between study partners as a requirement for Torah study (which is close to Greco-Roman discussions of friendship); (b) what I propose to call “the rabbinic marriage metaphor,” i.e., the representations of study partnership as a metaphorical marriage between study partners, which correlate with the larger rabbinic imagery of Torah study as marriage to the Torah or to God (which parallels the prophetic marriage metaphor in the Hebrew Bible); and (c) the eroticized images of male Torah scholars and the motif of male homoerotic lineage that express the rabbis’ views of masculinity (which is similar to the Greco-Roman ideals of manliness, especially with respect to a philosopher). These three types of rabbinic constructions of (homo)eroticized intellectualism, when read together, set a distinctive literary pattern that introduces a homoerotic trope of study partnership in Jewish literature. This trope is evident in the tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in the final story of the Rabbi Yohanan Cycle.

This chapter does not claim that the ancient rabbis necessarily understood these intimate practices between males to be sexual. The rabbinic study practice was not intended to be queer; in fact, it was perceived as normative. Hence, homosociality and queerness are not identical, even if some queer relations are homosocial, as would be the case in the historical context. While recuperating a past history in a way that is productive for the present, I am aware that the meanings I draw from these texts based on my interpretive analyses break with the meanings of these texts in the past. Applying a contemporary queer lens to an ancient context in order to draw new meanings from older texts and practices, this chapter suggests that these images and practices allow for an understanding of study partnership as an intimate and possibly erotic arrangement that differs from modern understanding of Jewish religious tradition and sexuality. This chapter does not attempt to reconstruct the intentions of the ancient authors or their immediate readers. Rather, it explores, using Harding's wording, "how the texts might be construed in a modern context when brought into conversation with other cultural products within a theoretical framework informed by queer theory" (92).

3.1 Rabbinic Study Partnership

As the previous chapter demonstrates, the pair as the primary method of studying in Jewish religious educational settings, along with the term *havruta* attached to this method, most likely evolved in modern contexts. Nevertheless, the concept of study partnership, along with the image of scholarly masculinity associated with it, already plays a significant role in Jewish antiquity. Some traditions in the biblical wisdom literature associate an ideal masculinity with intellectual pursuits. Brettler notes that, while the predominant biblical model of masculinity is the ideal of the hegemonic male, which involves dominance and violence, the Hebrew Bible includes other

images of masculinity, such as a description of the ideal male as studying the Torah⁶⁹ “day and night” in Ps. 1.2 (“Gender” 2178). This different masculine ideal likely developed late in the biblical period when Israel lacked political power. The scholarly ideal of manliness became more prominent in the rabbinic period. Classical Jewish sources demonstrate that studying in pairs was a widely accepted practice across Jewish communities from the rabbinic period onward.

Although rabbinic literature generally does not use the term *havruta* in the sense known today,⁷⁰ the ancient rabbis developed a notion of study partnership as a significant element of their intellectual life. Rabbinic literature contains recurrent references to studying in pairs. Rabbinic traditions often tell us about the importance and popularity of this mode of learning among the ancient rabbis. This has been noted in Jewish critical scholarship. For instance, Adler claims that study partnership was one of the defining social structures of rabbinic society and one of the most idealized (“Virgin” 32). Rubenstein points to the “Bavli’s emphasis on the importance of a study-partner with whom a sage learns Torah” (*Culture* 51).

The use of the term *havruta* in rabbinic sources shows the meanings of union, interpersonal closeness such as friendship, and intellectual activity, often in academic settings. The ancient rabbis use this terminology, which is related to the root *h.b.r.* (lit. “unite”), to refer to specific types of relationships between scholars. Sometimes, although inconsistently, it refers to study partnership between scholars. The Aramaic term *havruta* (sometimes spelled *habaruta*) in rabbinic literature entails meanings of “attachment,” “companionship, friendship,” “company,” or “society” (b.Bava Batra 16a-b; b.Berakhot 34a; b.Megillah 25a). An example of this use is the phrase “friendship [*havruta*] with Heaven” in a case of treating one’s prayers lightly as if talking

⁶⁹ Apparently, this verse refers to studying the Pentateuch (Brettler and Berlin 1269).

⁷⁰ See my discussion of some ambiguous instances, such as “either *havruta* or death” in b.Taanit 23a, later in this chapter.

to a friend (b.Berakhot 34a; b.Megillah 25a). As a collective noun, *havruta* can refer to “scholars of the college,” “academic fellows,” “peers,” or “colleagues” (b.Yevamot 96b; b.Hullin 57b; see Jastrow 423). For instance, the Babylonian Talmud uses the term *havruta* to refer to a scholar’s colleagues, as opposed to students (b.Yevamot 96b), or to the entire group of scholars (b.Kiddushin 44a).⁷¹ A related term *haverut* can designate the position of a scholar, or an academic fellowship (Jastrow 423). The Aramaic term *havruta* is related to Hebrew *havurah*, derived from *hiber* (“united,” from the root *h.b.r.*, “unite”), with a primary meaning of “union” (united as a group).

The primary meaning of the Hebrew and Aramaic word *haver*, from which *havruta* is derived, is “friend, companion, associate, partner,” for example, *haver tov*, “a good friend” (b.Shabbat 63a) or “a true friend,” as opposed to *haver ra’*, “a false friend” (m.Avot 2.9). The term *haver* in rabbinic literature can also refer to a study partner, a colleague, a fellow student or scholar (e.g., t.Kiddushin 5.6; Gen. Rabbah 84).⁷² Sometimes it is used in a narrower sense, as a scholar’s title, “Fellow” (b.Kiddushin 33b; b.Sanhedrin 8b) or, in conjunction with *talmid* (“student, disciple”), as an academic title of distinction: *talmid haver*, “student-colleague,” in Babylonian sources (b.Bava Batra 158b; b.Berakhot 27b), or *haver ve-talmid*, “colleague and student,” in Palestinian sources (y.Shekalim 3, 47b; y.Bava Batra 9, 17b). The feminine form, *haveret*, or *haverah*, refers to a scholarly woman (b.Sanhedrin 8b). The noun *haver* (often in plural, *haverim*) can also refer more broadly to sages, rabbis as opposed to non-rabbis, *amei ha-arets* (Kalmin, *Sage* 32; Rubenstein, *Culture* 124, 127).

⁷¹ In the form of *haburta* in b.Bava Kamma 71a and b.Ketubot 33b. Compare with *haverut*, “the position of a scholar,” “fellowship” in y.Berakhot 5, 9a.

⁷² See also works on the earlier usage of the term *haver* as a member of a Pharisaic fellowship (*havurah*) or a Qumran commune, distinguished by special adherence to the laws of ritual purity (Neusner, *Fellowship*).

The ancient rabbis generally disapprove of the practice of studying alone. Instead, they encourage learning in pairs or groups: “Torah is only acquired in association with others [*havurah*]⁷³ (b.Berakhot 63b). A Tannaitic source explains the importance of studying with a partner: “Your study partner (*haver*) will make it [the Torah] solid in your hand, ‘and do not rely on your own understanding’ (Prov. 3.5)” (m.Avot 4.14). Some Palestinian Amoraim insist that studying without a partner would make one ignorant (y.Nedarim 11.1, 41c). Many Babylonian Amoraim record similar statements, asserting that scholars who study alone would grow foolish, or that they would sin because of a possible misunderstanding of a Jewish law (b.Berakhot 63b; b.Taanit 7a; b.Makkot 10a). Some Babylonian rabbis explain that two scholars could “sharpen one another” as iron tools sharpen each other (b.Ta’anit 7a). A similar tradition is related in a midrash: “A knife will only become sharpened at the side of another. So too, a Torah scholar can only become sharpened by his partner (*ba-havero*)” (Gen. Rabbah 69.2). In the original text, the image of the knife sharpened by another knife has a connotation of an intimate contact between bodies: “by the thigh (or loins) of her partner (*be-yarekh shel havertah*).” Although this phrase figuratively refers to intellectual interaction between study partners, the image of bodily contact that this metaphor constructs also suggests the association of *havruta* with physical closeness as part of the intellectual bond. In any scenario, these traditions suggest the crucial, exclusive role of a study partner for one’s scholarship.

The importance of studying with a partner is a recurrent theme in many rabbinic traditions. For instance, the Mishnah includes an imperative to find a teacher and a study partner (m.Avot 1.6; cf. Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3), which I discuss later in this chapter. Some sources refer to study pair as an established and widely accepted practice comparable to the legal requirements of

⁷³ Another possible translation: “in a group.”

a fixed number of participants for other significant religious activities such as rabbinic court (*beit din*) or communal prayer (*minyan*): “two in study, three in judgement, ten in prayer” (b.Berakhot 6a). This tradition also attributes a distinct sacred quality to the study pair, declaring that “the two who sit and engage in Torah study” receive the Divine Presence and that “their words of Torah are written in the Book of Remembrance” (b.Berakhot 6a). According to these statements, the relationship between two study partners has a unique spiritual meaning. The scholarship that the pair produces has a higher value and permanence, as opposed to solitary studies. The sources by Tannaim and Amoraim, both Palestinian and Babylonian, offer examples of study pairs among the sages. Already the Tannaitic literature demonstrates the notion of *havruta* as an established practice among the rabbis. Tosefta mentions Binyamin “the Egyptian convert,” one of the students of Rabbi Akiva who was a study partner (*haver*) with Rabbi Yehudah (t.Kiddushin 5.6). A midrashic tradition quotes Rabbi Chidka who mentioned Shimon Hashikmoni, of the disciples of Rabbi Akiva, as his study partner (*haver*) (Sifre Num. 68). The Amoraim record a tradition that mentions twelve thousand pairs of students in Rabbi Akiva’s study house (*beit midrash*) (b.Yevamot 62b). The story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a, which I discuss later in this chapter, emphasizes the importance of a study partner to the extent that when his study partner Resh Lakish dies, Rabbi Yohanan quits his studies and teaching, loses his mind, and dies. In a similar manner, a talmudic tale of Honi HaMe’aggel describes a scholar who slept for seventy years; having awakened, he could not find his friends or study partners, because everyone of his generation was no longer alive. Honi visited his home and the study hall, but neither his family nor scholars recognized him. He “became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died.” The story ends with a maxim: “Either *havruta*

or death” (b.Taanit 23a).⁷⁴ As Rubenstein points out, the theme of the critical importance of a study-partner connects the story of Honi and the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish: in both tales, one’s study-partners are dead and irreplaceable, which makes life not worth living (*Culture* 51; *Stories* 66).

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is important to note the rabbinic idea of shared Torah study and their insistence that knowledge should be acquired through a relationship with a study partner or partners. As the following sections of this chapter demonstrate, the nature of this relationship, in the mind of the ancient rabbis, is a close and intimate one. Sometimes one can see that the ancient rabbis also recognize a sexual tension present in such a relationship.

3.2 The Normative Intimacy of Torah Study

The rabbinic sources typically prescribe emotional and physical intimacy between study partners as a requirement for Torah study.⁷⁵ This is evident in the concept of *dibbuk haverim*, which I translate as the “attachment of study partners,” and in its treatment across a variety of Tannaitic and Amoraic sources. I suggest that this tradition echoes, on the one hand, the Greco-

⁷⁴ If one translates *havruta* in this passage as “friendship,” this phrase points to the importance of society, family, and friends for humans as social beings. Given the academic settings of the context (this saying immediately follows Honi’s visit to the study hall), this rabbinic dictum may also refer to the crucial role of study partnership in a scholar’s life. Kent reads this talmudic passage in a sense of more general companionship in study, rather than to a particular study partner (“Interactive” 25 n.65). Rubenstein, however, insists that in the context of this talmudic narrative, with its focus on the academy, *havruta* refers to a study-partner in the academy or academic fellowship (*Culture* 51; *Stories* 66). Holzer, too, asserts that the text refers to a *havruta* partner in the study pair: “either a *havruta* partner or death” (see his article of the same title). Holzer understands this rabbinic statement as highlighting the centrality of the dialogic component of Torah study (“Either” 146), to the point that “the opportunity to study together with a *hevruta* partner is considered a matter of life and death, that is, considered critical for learning” (“Either” 132). One can take a step further and argue that this rabbinic text also suggests the critical role of a study partner in a greater sense, in one’s personal life as well as in one’s studies.

⁷⁵ The very exclusion of women from Torah study, while manifesting the misogyny of the rabbinic culture, suggests the “underlying eroticism of the study of Torah” (Boyarin, *Carnal* 188). The same is true about the anxieties surrounding the scarce female images of scholars and ideal study partners, such as the story of Beruria, Rabbi Meir’s wife who was also his study partner (b.Berakhot 10a; b.Pesahim 62b) or the story of an unnamed woman whose studies with Rabbi Meir made her husband jealous (y.Sota 1.4; Lev. Rabba 9.9). In medieval Judaism, similar attitudes are evident in the commentaries on Beruria by Rashi and Yehuda ben Kalonymos and in the legend about Rashi’s daughters (Boyarin, *Carnal* 187–93).

Roman value of friendship, which was often understood as intimate relationship and, on the other hand, the biblical and rabbinic language of marriage. The normative intimacy of Torah study can also be seen in the rabbinic traditions of the Heavenly Academy that describe love relationships between male scholars and male God as a fellow scholar. These images represent male-male intimacy of shared Torah study in terms of intimacy with the divine. In all these instances, the normativity of the homosocial intimacy between men was predicated on its non-sexual character, which allowed for emotional and physical closeness that sometimes could have an erotic subtext. Some other rabbinic and later traditions, however, suggest that these rabbinic descriptions of *havruta* intimacy do not preclude a possibility of sexual desire and practice.

3.2.1 *Dibbuk Haverim*: “Attachment of Study Partners”

What could be perceived as queer today was normative to the ancient rabbis. The most striking example of the normative intimacy of Torah study, in its homosocial context, is the rabbinic concept of *dibbuk haverim*, which could be translated as attachment or closeness between friends or between study partners. A Tannaitic tradition in Avot juxtaposes the imperatives to find a teacher and a study partner, apparently deeming both of equal importance in education: “Make for yourself a teacher (*rav*), and acquire for yourself a [study] partner (*haver*)” (m.Avot 1.6).⁷⁶ This dictum suggests that having a permanent study partner, who is also a close friend, is as necessary for learning as having a teacher. A common explanation was that studying Torah alone could lead to a greater possibility of error and thus sinning (b.Berachot 63b).

⁷⁶ The term *haver* here is usually translated as “a friend” or “a companion.” The context of this mishnah, however, suggests that the text refers to study partnership rather than to friendship in general. Cf. Maharal’s commentary that adds acquiring a student (Derekh Chayim 1.6, 1), thus understanding this Mishnah as referring to various types of educational relationships (with one’s teacher, study partner, or student). My translation “a study partner” here and in some other examples, similar to my translation of *havruta* as “study partnership” rather than “friendship” in some instances, is based on the context of the passages. I understand, nevertheless, that “study partnership” is a derived meaning of *havruta* that, as a fixed technical term of the yeshiva jargon, has evolved later.

Another tradition in Avot lists closeness or attachment between study partners, *dibbuk*⁷⁷ *haverim*, as a requirement to acquire Torah, along with the other elements of the learning process such as focused study, careful listening (lit. “the attentive ear”), clear speech (lit. “the organized mouth”), “wisdom of the heart,” or consulting scholars (m.Avot 6.6). Usually translated as “friendship,” *dibbuk haverim* (lit. “clinging [or cleaving] between friends [study partners]”) could refer to a close, intimate bond between study partners. Jastrow translates *dibbuk haverim* in Avot 6.6 as “the friendship of students” (294), while he defines the noun *dibbuk* as “attachment, junction, intimacy” (294). *Haverim*, which in this context I translate as “study partners,” could also be translated as “friends” or “scholars” (see my earlier discussion). Avigdor Shinan reads “*dibbuk haverim*” as “study in *havruta*,” *limud behavruta* (*A New Israeli Commentary on Pirkei Avot*, Jerusalem, 2001-2009). A Palestinian Amoraic source elaborates on this mishnaic concept of intimacy between Torah students in an account of two students who ate together, drank together, and studied Scripture together (y.Sanhedrin 6.6; cf. y.Hagigah 2.2). A commentary on Avot 1.6 in Avot de Rabbi Nathan depicts closeness between students as central in the picture of an ideal study partnership: “This teaches that a man should get a companion (*haver*) for himself, to eat with him, drink with him, study Scripture with him, study Mishnah with him, sleep with him, and reveal to him all his secrets, the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of worldly things” (Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3; Goldin’s translation). Evidently, the ancient rabbis viewed study partnership as more than intellectual fellowship. The shared Torah study required a close personal relationship between the two partners, including physical and emotional intimacy, to the extent of living together and sharing lives, similar to a marital relationship. The Hebrew original

⁷⁷ There are two versions of this mishnah in Avot 6.6. One version uses the term *dibbuk* (“clinging,” “cleaving”). The other version uses the term *dikduk*, which has a meaning of “fine point, subtlety, detail, minuteness.” *Dikduk haverim* could refer to “the fine points discussed among scholars” or “the care in selection of friends” (Jastrow 294).

derekh erets, which Judah Goldin translates as “worldly things,” can also be translated contextually as “personal matters,” thus pointing to a greater degree of emotional intimacy.⁷⁸ Some elements of this intimacy can also allow sexual possibilities, although unlikely in the minds of the ancient rabbis. Katz describes a similar custom of bed sharing between men in the nineteenth century, noting that although this practice was not often eroticized then (at least, not explicitly), it “did provide an important site (probably, the major site) of erotic opportunities” (*Love* 6).

The intimacy of study partners, *dibbuk haverim*, described by the ancient rabbis (m.Avot 6.6; Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3; y.Sanhedrin 6.6), can be better understood in the context of the Greco-Roman value of friendship that had a broader meaning and greater significance than in modern Western society. The ancient cultures did not necessarily make distinctions between non-sexual friendship, erotic love, and shared intellectual pursuits. The notion of friendship that rabbinic culture shared with Greco-Roman culture included personal intimacy and erotic or sexual possibilities. It also had social and personal significance that was equal to, or greater than marriage.

Eugene Borowitz makes a sweeping claim that the biblical and rabbinic literature did not cultivate the ideal of friendship found in the writings of Greco-Roman thinkers and that the classical Jewish texts emphasized concern for one’s neighbour rather than the ideal of a close personal relationship as “a safeguard against homosexuality, which was so much a part of the Greek conception of friendship” (290). This unsupported statement shows misunderstanding of ancient Israelite/Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures alike. Aside from ahistorical superimposing

⁷⁸ Cf. confessing together at nightly gatherings to “reveal their deepest and most personal secrets” in Bitania’s Eda, an all-male community of Hashomer Hatzair, a Zionist youth movement, in the 1920s (Nur 140).

the modern category of homosexuality upon the ancient texts, Borowitz ignores the biblical images of heroic friendship, such as in the story of David and Jonathan, and the rabbinic traditions of intimate friendship between study partners such as the ones discussed in this dissertation, on the one hand, and the various conceptions of friendship in Greek thought, some erotic (e.g., in Plato's thought) and some not (e.g., in Aristotle's works).

In his recent work on friendship in the Hebrew Bible, Olyan notes that there is no clear evidence for a claim that biblical constructions of friendship include a possibility of sexual relations. Nevertheless, there are numerous biblical instances when the language of friendship and sexual love overlap or, as in the narrative of David and Jonathan, the friendship is eroticized (Olyan, *Friendship* 9). The biblical concept of friendship puts a greater emphasis on emotional intimacy, in contrast to the Greco-Roman ideals of friendship that prioritize virtue, for example, in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.3-4 (Olyan, *Friendship* 36). Olyan's work supports my argument about the duality of the ancient Judaic literature that separates the affective discourse associated with emotional intimacy of homosocial bonds from the phallogocentric discourse associated with sexual acts that represent gender asymmetry.

In Greek thought, Plato consistently associates friendship with erotic passion (see his *Lysis*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*), whereas Aristotle refuses to consider the erotic relationship as a form of friendship (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1157a3-14, 1159b11-19). In Rome, "friendship" (*amicitia*) and "love" (*amor*) were often used interchangeably; both could be employed to describe erotic passion, which in Greek was distinguished by *eros* and its cognates (Konstan, *Classical* 122). The Latin *amicus*, "a friend," is derived from *amo*, "to love"; this same principle applies to the Greek *philos*, from *phileo* (Lewis and Short 106-07). Lewis and Short define *amor* as an internal love of friends, which is the cause of friendly treatment, *benevolentia* (108). *Amor*

could also mean “a strong, passionate longing for something,” “desire,” and “lust” (Lewis and Short 108). Likewise, most of the Hebrew terms for “friend” convey the notion of “love,” including erotic feelings, such as *re’e* (Brown et al. 945–46; Jastrow 1475–76), *yedid* (Brown et al. 391; Jastrow 564), and *dod* (Brown et al. 187; Jastrow 283). The Biblical Hebrew active present participle *ohav* means both “loving” and “being a friend” (Brown et al. 13). The standard Greek terms for “friendship,” *philia*, and “friend,” *philos*, underwent substantial semantic transformations throughout various periods (Konstan, *Classical* 10–11). The Hebrew *dod* is probably the closest to the Greek *philos*, since it covers a similar range of meanings: “friend, lover, beloved, kin” in both Biblical Hebrew (Brown et al. 187) and in Rabbinic Hebrew (Jastrow 283). The specification of friends as a distinct group, distinguished from civil and familial identity, is connected to the development of *polis* and its institutions (Konstan, “Frankness” 8). Some scholars suggest that friendship occupies a much more prominent place in classical rather than in modern ethics, precisely because it covers a larger set of obligations associated with communal life of the classical *polis* (Schroeder 56). Similarly, the Hebrew *re’e*, “friend, associate, neighbour,” could also mean “fellow-citizen” (Brown et al. 946–946), i.e., a member of the Judean *ethnos* (Jastrow 1475), residing in Jerusalem. In the Hebrew Bible, the words for “friend” often overlap with designations of family members, political allegiances, or sexual intimates (Olyan, *Friendship* 6–9).

“Friendship,” or “companionship,” is the primary meaning of *havruta*, derived from *haver*, “friend,” “companion.”⁷⁹ The use of the Hebrew *haver* (or *haverim* in plural) to refer to Torah

⁷⁹ Biblical and rabbinic texts use several terms for “friend” (*haver*, *yedid*, *re’a*, *dod*, *ohav*), but these terms might not be equivalent to the Greek *philia* or Latin *amicitia*. Although some Hebrew abstract nouns such as *re’ut* (Brown et al. 945) and *ahavah* (Jastrow 19) also signify “friendship,” their primary meaning designates other types of relationships: “association” in the former (Jastrow 1475–76) and “love” in a broad sense in the latter.

scholars in rabbinic literature (Brown et al. 288; Jastrow 421–22) parallels a Hellenistic designation of the members of philosophical schools as “friends” (*philoi*). Rabbinic dictums such as “Either *havruta* or death” (b.Taanit 23a) or “Make for yourself a teacher (*rav*), and acquire for yourself a *haver*” (m.Avot 1.6) could be understood, outside of the context of the Study Hall, as rabbinic emphasis on significance of friendship and human companionship in general, similar to Greco-Roman ideals of friendship, for example, in Aristotle’s aphorism “without friends no one would choose to live” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8, 1055a4). For some Tannaim, friendship is the core of the ideal ethical life: “What is the good way a man should cleave to? Rabbi Joshua said: Being a good friend [*haver tov*]” (Avot 2.10). This dictum resembles the Aristotelian discussion of happiness (*eudaimonia*) and virtue (*arete*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Books 8 and 9).

The rabbinic images of the intimacy between study partners, however, go beyond the conventional Greco-Roman ideas of friendship. It has been pointed out that the ancient rabbis imagine their study partners as “the most emotionally and socially intimate partner” (Sienna 46). I suggest that the rabbis conceptualize study partnership as a metaphorical marriage or as an alternative to marriage. For example, in the Tannaitic imperative mentioned earlier, “Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a [study] partner (*haver*)” (m.Avot 1.6), the term “acquire” (*keneh*) is the same as in the legal definitions of Jewish marriage: “A woman [or “wife”] is acquired (*niknet*) in three ways and acquires (*konah*) herself in two: she is acquired by money, by document, or by intercourse” (m.Kiddushin 1.1).⁸⁰ Apparently, the rabbinic tradition in Avot 1.6 imagines finding a study partner as equal to getting married: one marries (“acquires”)

⁸⁰ Obviously, there are other possibilities of the use of the verb *keneh*, “to acquire,” not limited to marriage. The formulation of the rabbinic marriage law is, however, fundamental to the Talmud students to the extent that the use of the same term in another context that involves human relationships would likely bring similar associations to the reader. Cf. the common biblical wording of “taking a wife” based on the root *l.q.h.*, “to take.”

a *havruta* partner like a wife.⁸¹ In another rabbinic dictum discussed above, the concept of attachment between male study partners, *dibbuk haverim* (m.Avot 6.6) employs the term “clinging” (*dibbuk*, from the root *d.b.k*) that is used in the Hebrew Bible, in the J source in Genesis, which can be dated approximately to the tenth century BCE, to describe the marital union between the first humans, Adam and Eve: “Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings (*davak*) to his wife, so that they become one flesh” (Gen. 2.24). The text of Genesis includes the connotations of attachment, commitment, and sexual connection, “becoming one flesh.” In this passage, marriage is defined as union of bodies, as first and foremost a sexual relationship, which also implies a personal attachment and a sense of togetherness.

Another instance of the use of this term in a sexual context could be found in a rabbinic midrash on the Song of Songs that allegorically interprets a sexual embrace between lovers, a man and a woman, depicted in the biblical text (“His left hand was under my head, His right arm embraced me,” Song of Sg. 2.6) as an example of intimate attachment, “clinging” (*dibbuk*) to God (Midrash Song of Sg. Rabbah 2.6).⁸² The rabbis’ choice of terminology for the relationship between study partners suggests an emphasis on intimacy that parallels and surpasses the marital relationship.⁸³ The description of *havruta* intimacy in Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3 discussed earlier, too, implies a parallel between *havruta* and marriage, which this text reinforces by making a connection to a biblical text that refers to a life partner, apparently a spouse (Eccles.

⁸¹ Maimonides understands the idea of “acquisition” (*keniyah*) in Avot 1.6 as referring to study partnership in terms of larger friendship, finding a friend (lit. “lover,” *ohev*) who would help one to improve “his deeds and all his matters.” Maimonides identifies the “friend” in Avot 1.6 as the Aristotelian “friend for virtue,” “when the desire of both of them and their intention is for one thing” (Maimonides on Avot 1.6).

⁸² On the homoeroticism of the traditional images of the relationship between a male God and male worshippers, see Howard I. Schwartz; Jennings; Wolfson; Moore.

⁸³ In the Hebrew Bible, derivatives of *d.b.k*, “to cling (to),” can also be “an idiom of loyalty used of the friend” (Olyan, *Friendship* 4), such as “there is a friend (*ohev*) more devoted (*davek*) than a brother” (Prov. 18.24) and “Ruth clung (*dovkah*) to her” (Ruth 1.14). Some, however, point out that the language of “clinging” in the depiction of Ruth’s attachment to Naomi transcends the meaning of friendship and that it suggests a committed love relationship analogous to marriage (Alpert 45–47).

4.7-11). The examples above show that not only do the rabbis prescribe intimacy between study partners, but they also conceptualize *havruta* as the most significant relationship, often more significant than marriage.

3.2.2 “You are Rabba’s and Rabba is Yours”: The Lovers of the Heavenly Academy

The normative intimacy of Torah study can also be seen in the images of scholars as lovers within the walls of rabbinic academies on earth or in heaven. These images add a new layer to the normative intimacy between Torah students by equating it with the love relationship with God. In their project of rabbinizing the earlier traditions,⁸⁴ some midrashic traditions imagine God and Moses as study partners learning the Torah together on Mount Sinai (Midrash Rabbah on Exod. 41.5). Some traditions also emphasize a love relationship between Torah scholars and God (Targum of Song of Sg. 4.9). The most remarkable examples are the rabbinic traditions of the Heavenly Academy that convey the ideal image of the yeshiva as the place of ultimate intellectual pleasure and perfect love relationships between scholars, including God as a fellow scholar and lover. Strikingly, these traditions portray God not as a judge nor a teacher but as a fellow Torah scholar and a study partner who engages in academic debates with the sages (see Rubenstein, *Culture* 29–30). This and similar traditions assert that God, the ideal of Jewish masculinity, studies Torah in the same way as Jewish men do, and with the same culturally expected intimacy of the shared Torah study, but, of course, in a perfect, divine way.

The rabbinic concept of the “yeshiva above” (Hebrew *yeshivah shel ma’alah*) or “the yeshiva of heaven” (Aramaic *metivta de-rakia*) refers to a study-house or academy in heaven, “above,”

⁸⁴ On this rabbinic strategy, see Neusner, *Invitation* 8; Rubenstein, *Culture* 1–3, 28; Diamond 377, 390, 406–07; Kalmin, *Sage* 51; Kalmin, *Babylonia* 37). See also my discussion later in this chapter.

in which the souls of the rabbis study the Torah with God and the angels.⁸⁵ This heavenly academy was thought to correspond to the ancient rabbinic academies on earth, “below.” See, for example, the following statements: “Anyone who financially supports Torah scholars is rewarded and sits in the Heavenly Academy” (b.Pesahim 53b); “Anyone who teaches Torah to the son of another merits to sit and study in the Heavenly Academy” (b.Bava Metzia 85a); “For every day that a man refrained from attending the yeshiva in this world, he will be denied entry into the Heavenly Yeshiva in the World to Come” (Kav HaYashar 53.5). Rabbinic sayings and narratives⁸⁶ often imagine biblical patriarchs, prophets, and kings (such as Abraham, Isaac, Judah, Moses, Elijah, or Solomon) or talmudic sages of the past as studying or teaching in the Heavenly Yeshiva (see b.Pesahim 53b; b.Bava Metzia 86a-85b; b.Hagigah 14a; b.Makkot 11b; b.Bava Kamma 92a).⁸⁷ These rabbinic traditions imagine the Yeshiva Above as a place where studying Torah reaches its highest level, where one’s teacher or study partner is God or an angel (or sometimes a demon), or the soul of a biblical hero, who can reveal the “secrets of the Torah,” an esoteric knowledge of the text or some new interpretive possibilities.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Rubenstein argues that the term *yeshiva shel ma’ala* acquired the meaning of a study-house or academy only in the Babylonian rabbinic traditions, as opposed to the Tannaitic and Palestinian Amoraic use of this term in referring to a court session in the “heavenly court,” *bet din shel ma’ala* (*Culture* 28).

⁸⁶ These rabbinic traditions were followed by medieval and early modern Jewish exegetical, legal, moralistic, and mystical works such as Rashi’s commentary on Lev. 11.43; Zohar, Shelach 167a, Balak 185b; Tzvi Hirsch Kaidanover’s *Kav HaYashar* 44.8, 27.2, 53.5, 6.5; Nachman of Breslov’s *Sefer Ha-Midot*; Shlomo Ganzfried’s *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*.

⁸⁷ Cf. the midrash that imagines biblical patriarchs, like rabbis, studying Torah in a yeshiva on earth, e.g., Isaac in “the yeshiva of Shem and Eber” (Gen. Rabba 56.11 on Gen. 22.19). The ancient rabbis were well aware that they were superimposing later categories upon earlier periods. Some rabbinic traditions contemplated how foreign the yeshiva environment must have been for a biblical patriarch. They described Judah’s incapability to study in the Heavenly Yeshiva and to engage in debates with scholars due to a lack of training in the methods of rabbinic argumentation. Each stage of Judah’s basic academic progress required miracles through Moses’ prayers (b.Makot 11b; b.Bava Kamma 92a).

⁸⁸ The Heavenly Yeshiva was also imagined as a place where good scholarship, done with clarity of thought, the right methodology, and proper references, would be rewarded by the ultimate intellectual pleasures of the Garden of Eden, whereas poor scholarship and intellectual dishonesty would bring humiliation and punishment in Gehenna (Kav HaYashar 27.2).

The idea of Heaven as the yeshiva, the Heavenly Academy, as a perfect place to study suggests a view of the yeshiva as heaven, as the place of ultimate pleasure and perfect intimacy. Some traditions imagine the earthly sages being called to arbitrate in the disputes among the sages or even between the sages and God in the Heavenly Academy—not only because of these sages’ wisdom, but first and foremost because of their intimate, love relationship with God. For example, in the story about Rabba bar Nahmani, who was taken to the Heavenly Academy to resolve an intellectual disagreement between the rabbis and God, the Talmud describes the relationship between God and Rabba bar Nahmani as a relationship between two lovers: “You are Rabba’s and Rabba is Yours” (b.Bava Metsia 86a).⁸⁹ The Talmud employs a verse from the Song of Songs that affirms the commitment between the lovers: “I am my beloved’s, And my beloved is mine [*ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*]” (Song of Sg. 6.3). The context of this phrase in the Song of Songs is explicitly sexual; it appears within the depiction of the intimate encounter between the male and female lovers: “My beloved has gone down to his garden, To the beds of spices, To browse in the gardens And to pick lilies. I am my beloved’s And my beloved is mine; He browses among the lilies” (Song of Sg. 6.2-3). In this passage from the Song of Songs, the “garden” represents the woman’s body, and “browsing in the garden” refers to sexual intimacy. By utilizing this erotic imagery, the rabbis eroticize and romanticize their relationship with God. They also sexualize the intellectual space of the yeshiva or the academy. In this talmudic tale, the male God performs the role of the female lover from the Song of Songs who shows her infatuation, affection, and unconditional commitment to her beloved, Rabba bar Nahmani. Similar traditions could be found elsewhere in rabbinic literature, for example, in a midrash in

⁸⁹ Cf. Zoharic depiction of the voices of Jewish scholars involved in biblical exegesis as arousing God’s sexual desire (Wolfson 330).

b.Hagigah 14a that, too, constructs the image of God as a Torah scholar in the Heavenly Yeshiva and as a lover in relation to fellow male scholars, the sages.

3.2.3 “Suspected of *Mishkav Zakhur*”: The Sexually Transgressive *Havruta*

The examples above depict the intimacy of study partnership in non-sexual terms. Given the ban on sexual practices between males in the biblical and rabbinic legal traditions, stemming from the Book of Leviticus, one can argue that it is precisely this non-sexual understanding of the emotional and physical intimacy of study partnership that made it normative, socially approved, and even prescribed. In Rachel Adler’s words, “from the rabbinic perspective, the study partners’ lack of sexual motive is what safeguards these intimacies” (“Virgin” 32). This, however, was not always the case. As Sienna notes, “intimate relationships between male yeshiva students, based in the prescriptions of rabbinic tradition, have been documented throughout Jewish history” (119). There are rabbinic traditions and post-talmudic recounts that point to a conflation of Jewish learning and same-sex desires or practices, in relationships between teachers and students, among students, or among scholars. These literary and historical records demonstrate an association of the yeshiva studies with male-male erotic desire or sexual practices in popular Jewish imaginations and in the social reality of Jewish communities. These incidents, actual or imagined, were sometimes seen as inconsequential and sometimes as producing anxiety around transgressions of the Jewish law or social conventions. As the examples below show, typically, these documents regarded sexual relations between men as analogous to other violations of Jewish law or to other expressions of self-indulgence such as adultery or excessive drinking.

Both Palestinian and Babylonian Talmudim include references to sexual relationships between yeshiva students as known practices.⁹⁰ For instance, the Palestinian Talmud, in a discussion of various situations related to testifying in the rabbinic court, recounts an incident with Rabbi Jehudah ben Pazi, who “went to the upper floor of the Study Hall and saw two men engaged in a sexual intercourse with each other (*nizkakin zeh lazeh*)” (y.Sanhedrin 6.3 28a). Since this episode takes place in a Study Hall, it is safe to assume that the men involved in this transgressive behavior were students or scholars who studied there together. The Babylonian Talmud cites a Tannaitic tradition from a *baraita* that mentions a prohibition “to go out perfumed into the marketplace” among other things considered shameful for a Torah scholar (b.Berakhot 43b). The Amoraim understood this dictum to be a precaution against being suspected of practising sex between males, *mishkav zakhur*: “‘He [a Torah scholar] may not go out perfumed into the marketplace’. Rabbi Abba, son of Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, said that Rabbi Yohanan said: In a place where they are suspected of male-male sex (*mishkav zakhur*)” (b.Berakhot 43b). These traditions suggest that the ancient rabbis recognized the sexual possibilities inherent in the shared Torah study and that students or scholars were expected (suspected) to actualize those possibilities in certain situations.

⁹⁰ A metaphorical yet explicit link between Torah study and male-male sexual practices can be seen in a rabbinic tradition that attributes the following saying to Rabbi Eliezer: “I have taught much Torah, and my students have taken away from me only like a brush in a tube (*k'mich'khol bishfoferet*)” (b.Sanhedrin 68a). The phrase “like a brush in a tube (*k'mich'khol bishfoferet*)” typically appears in the Talmud as a technical term used as a definition of sexual intercourse, as the following examples demonstrate: “With regard to one who engages in intercourse with a forbidden relative, how would they [the judges] have acted? Abaye and Rava both say that they would have asked the witnesses: Did you see ‘like a brush in a tube?’” (b.Makkot 7a; cf. Sefer HaChinukh 211:4); “But with regard to one who crossbreeds two animals of diverse kinds, he is liable only if inserted ‘like a brush in a tube’ [...] When mating an animal with its own species, it is permitted to insert ‘like a brush in a tube’” (b.Bava Metsia 91a; b.Avodah Zarah 20b; cf. Maimonides, Sefer HaMitzvot, Negative Commandments 217:1). Rashi uses this term in defining the sexual intercourse between males in his commentary to Lev. 20.13: “‘Lyings of woman’ means that he inserts ‘like a brush in a tube’.”

There are also accounts from the Geonic period. Roth mentions an incident during the tenth-century conflict between the heads of the famous Babylonian rabbinic academies, when Khalaf Ibn Sarjada, who “sat in the first row” of the yeshivah in Pumbedita, accused Saadia Gaon, the head of the yeshiva in Sura and the leading authority in Jewish law and philosophy of the time, of engaging in sexual acts with “the youth of Nehardea” who “wearied themselves in pursuing him” (23).⁹¹ Saadia Gaon never attempted to refute these accusations, “although he carefully refuted all the other charges against him” (Roth 23). Roth also mentions a reference to love between men as an example of erotic passion in Saadia’s *Emunot ve-De’ot*, the first systematic work of Jewish philosophy (23). Although Saadia Gaon strongly supported the biblical and rabbinic prohibitions of sex between males in his legal works, these examples demonstrate that same-sex love (not always “platonic”) to a certain degree was part of academic life and intellectual discourse in the post-talmudic academies.

A number of documents from the late Middle Ages through the modern era present accounts of sex between yeshiva students and study partners in Sephardic communities of Spain, the Netherlands, and the Ottoman Empire. Steven Greenberg points to a fifteenth-century Torah commentary of Abarbanel, a leading Spanish-Jewish thinker and biblical commentator, who reads the biblical prohibition of cross-dressing as a form of seducing other men. In Greenberg’s historicizing reading, Abarbanel’s text can serve as evidence of a sexual culture among yeshiva students in the Jewish communities contemporaneous to Abarbanel: “Apparently, Abarbanel knew of a pattern of same-sex cruising in which cross-dressing played a central role” (179). Sienna’s anthology of queer Jewish documents includes a letter written in 1674 by Rabbi Yaakov Sasportas, a halakhic authority in Amsterdam at that time, to his colleague Rabbi Yehoshua da

⁹¹ An allusion to Isa. 58.13, *asot hafatsekha*, “pursuing your desire.”

Silva, which describes rumors of sexual activity between two male yeshiva students in Ets Haim Yeshiva in Amsterdam. The rabbi's decision in that case affirmed the normativity of the intimacy between study partners. Sasportas stated that "the activities of young men are meaningless [*hevel*]," i.e., they did not violate Jewish law, and therefore the students should not be expelled from the yeshiva (Sienna 120). The two yeshiva students mentioned in this document, Isaac Netto and Elijah Lopez, later became prominent rabbis and community leaders (Sienna 119). There are also records of sexual activity in yeshivot in the Ottoman Empire.⁹² For instance, *Orhat Yosher*, a rabbinic work on the customs of Salonica written by Isaac Molkho in 1769, mentions a communal ordinance (*takkanah*) issued by the community leaders in Salonica to restrict the movement of unmarried men because of the prevalence of sexual activity among the students of local yeshivot. This community ordinance demonstrates an assumption that young unmarried yeshiva students can easily engage in sexual activities with one another, "for in every case temptation dances before them, and it is not possible for youth to resist the flame," as Molkho explains (Sienna 126). This document claims that at the festive events and celebrations, including singing at the "[yeshiva of the] Talmud Torah on Shabbat," "most of the bachelors transgress against the prohibition of, '*You shall not lie with a man as with a woman*' (Lev. 18.22)" (Sienna 126, 128; editor's italics). The author, who claimed to have had witnessed "many corruptions" of this sort over the period of twenty years, described, as an example, an account of sex between two yeshiva students wherein a study session turned into a sexual interaction. The rabbis of Salonica warned in their community ordinance that "no unmarried student may go about at night to the house of study where married men study" and "no young

⁹² For a social context, see Ben-Naeh on historical accounts that "attest to the visibility and prevalence of sexual relations between males" in Jewish communities of the early modern Ottoman Empire, with "de-facto legitimization" of these relations by the Jewish and general public (105). Ben-Naeh suggests that in these Jewish communities same-sex sexual desire was viewed as inevitable and natural characteristic of maleness (105).

man who is unmarried may go to study sessions at night” (Sienna 127–28). These measures were supposed to prevent sexual relations among students that accompanied their studies—the relations that the community leaders perceived as common.

Similar assumptions could be found in popular imaginations of the Ashkenazic communities in Eastern Europe. Jewish works of fiction in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, and German produced in this milieu sometimes demonstrate the associations between Torah study and same-sex sexual practices as transgressive yet common and expected. For example, Maskilic Hebrew satires such as Shimshon Bloch’s satirical letter to Joseph Perl (1817) or Joseph Perl’s *Revealer of Secrets* (1819) describe the Hasidic study house (*beit midrash*) as a place of sexual activities between men (Sienna 133; Seidman, *Plot* 274). These associations were later employed, in a more positive representation, in S. An-sky’s play *The Dybbuk* (1914) and Jiří Mordechai Langer’s book *The Eroticism of Kabbalah* (1923), both of which I discuss in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

3.3 Rabbinic Marriage Metaphor: Erotic Triangle of Learning

In critical biblical scholarship, the widely accepted term “prophetic marriage metaphor” refers to the biblical images of God and Israel as married lovers (e.g., Hos. 1-2; Jer. 2-4; Ezek. 16 and 23). Based on the analogy to this term, I propose a term “rabbinic marriage metaphor” in respect to the rabbinic imagery of Torah study as marriage, when the Torah is imagined as the scholar’s lover or wife and when engagement with the text is conceptualized as sexual activity. This rabbinic marriage metaphor extends to the representations of study partnership as a metaphorical marriage between study partners. The rabbis engaged in study partnership thus imagine the process of Torah study as a love relationship that binds male scholars to the female Torah, to the male God as a fellow Torah scholar, or to other male rabbis, colleagues or students. I suggest that

a conceptual connection between the image of Torah as lover and the normative intimacy between study partners (or teachers and students) allowed constructions of the homoeroticism of rabbinic intellectual life: it expanded the erotic appeal of the Torah (and God as the meaning of Torah) to a fellow scholar and in this way created the erotic-affective triangle of Torah study, in which intimacy with the Torah (and with God through the Torah) enabled and mediated the intimacy between study partners.

3.3.1 Torah as Lover and Study as Lovemaking

The trope of Torah study as an intimacy between the reader and the text, which is common in rabbinic literature, lends itself to a queer reading in several ways. It establishes an association of the intellectual activity with sexual activity, approaching the text as a shared fetish. It eroticizes the Torah and, by association, a study partner. It can also serve as a metaphor for same-sex desire disguised as heteronormative erotic passion for the Torah. Ultimately, the rabbis' representation of their intellectual activities as a love relationship with the text of the Torah or with each other reflects the rabbis' understanding of their relationship with the divine. As Moore points out, the "supreme intimacy with the deity takes the form of Torah study" because "God himself is a scholar, then, and Israel is a woman who has fallen in love with a scholar" (36).

The antagonistic view of Torah study and male sexual desire for women in rabbinic literature suggests a generally negative (or limited) view of sex apart from procreation, a view that is often accompanied with misogynistic cultural assumptions. As such, it represents male homosociality of Torah study as antithetical to sexual desire. At the same time, these rabbinic traditions correlate with the eroticized imagery of Torah study, which often points to a homoerotic energy of the male homosocial spaces in rabbinic academies. It represents marriage and Torah study as competing yet analogous spheres. The contradictory images of the relationship between Torah

study and sexual desire in rabbinic literature can be explained by the duality of the ancient Judaic culture. Within the phallogentric discourse, which was associated with heteronormative sex and marriage, the ancient rabbis represent sexual desire and Torah study as antagonistic. In contrast, within the affective discourse, which was produced within homosocial settings of the rabbinic study hall, sexual desire is represented as the driving force of Torah. The passion for the Torah, which was imagined in erotic terms as the scholar's lover or wife, thus, performed a double function. On the one hand, it sublimated sexual desire. It substituted for the actual sexual activity and the actual wife through the exclusion of women from the intellectual and intimate spheres at once. In this way, it participated in the androcentric and misogynistic structures of rabbinic culture.⁹³ On the other hand, it potentially allowed for the homoeroticism of rabbinic intellectual life. It enabled the expansion of the erotic appeal of the Torah that now included a fellow scholar or student. In this way, it created the erotic triangle of Torah study, in which the Torah mediated an intimacy between study partners. Much like Plato's notion of two kinds of love in gender-segregated Athenian society (*Symposium* 202a-212c), this arrangement of the phallogentric and affective discourses in rabbinic literature was predicated on the male homosocial structure of Jewish intellectual life.⁹⁴

The image of the scholar represented the rabbinic ideal of masculinity that involved demands for sexual self-control, which the ancient rabbis shared with major Hellenistic philosophical schools such as the Stoics (Satlow, *Tasting* 158, 168–69, 182–83). While the ancient rabbis generally disapproved of celibacy, some rabbinic traditions still considered heteronormative

⁹³ For a discussion of the oppressive effects of the rabbinic construction of Torah study as a "system for the domination of women," see Boyarin, *Unheroic* chapter IV.

⁹⁴ Cf. Wolfson's discussion of medieval Jewish mysticism where representation of mental activity by means of sexual imagery, especially homoerotically charged, is predicated on the ascetic abnegation of the body and physical pleasure and on dichotomization of carnal passion and spiritual eros (318, 324, 327, 350, 367).

sexual desire an obstacle that a scholar had to overcome or, in some instances, was lucky enough not to experience. For instance, the Talmud describes extraordinary efforts of the sages to escape sexual advances of Roman noblewomen in the stories about Rabbi Hanina bar Pappi and Rabbi Tzadok in b.Kiddushin 39b-40a. There are also accounts of rabbis who admitted their sexual disinterest in women, such as Rav Aha (b.Ketubot 17a) or Rav Giddal (b.Berakhot 20a). The theme of self-control is recurrent in many rabbinic discussions of the “Evil Desire” (*yetser hara*), which often refers to male sexual desire, typically outside of sanctioned relationships (among other kinds of transgressive desires).⁹⁵ Usually, the “Evil Desire” is viewed as standing in opposition to the “Good Desire” (*yetser tov*), which is understood as passion for Torah study or for observance of the Jewish Law. Many rabbinic traditions discuss sexual desire as something to be resisted by Torah scholars (m.Avot 4.1; b.Sukkah 52a; b.Sanhedrin 45a, 105a; b.Kiddushin 21b; b.Berakhot 20a; b.Pesahim 113b; b.Avodah Zarah 17a-b; b.Ketubot 17a). A rabbinic statement in Avot, a Mishnaic tractate addressed to Torah scholars, formulates the rabbinic ideal

⁹⁵ For the use of *yetser hara* as referring to male sexual desire (which seems to be a derived meaning, perhaps, under Hellenistic or Christian influence), see Sifre Bamidbar 88; b.Shabbat 89a; b.Menachot 44a; b.Berakhot 5a, 17a, 60b-61a; b.Kiddushin 30b, 40a, 80b, 81b; b.Yoma 35b, 69b; b.Moed Katan 17a, 24a; b.Hagiga 16a; b.Sukkah 51b-52b; b.Eruvin 18b; b.Sanhedrin 99b; y.Berakhot 4.2, 7d; Gen. Rabbah 22.6, 23.5. See also Urbach 471-83; Boyarin, *Carnal* 61-68, 75, 135; Satlow, *Tasting* 73, 159-67. Other meanings of *yetser hara* include, along with sexually transgressive desires, inclination for idolatry (t.Bava Kamma 9.11; Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael 20.4; Sifra Shemini, Mechilta d’Miluim 2; b.Yoma 69b), foreign customs (Sifra Aharei Mot 13.7), transgression of the Halakhah, for example, the laws of the Sabbath, dietary laws, or ritual purity laws (Avot de Rabbi Nathan 16; Sifra Aharei Mot 13.9), or negative traits such as arrogance (Gen. Rabbah 22.6), anger (t.Bava Kamma 9.11; b.Shabbat 105b), and inclination to violence (Gen. Rabbah 34.10; Avot de Rabbi Nathan 16). These examples and the usage of the term *yetser hara*, recorded in Jastrow’s dictionary, suggest the broader meaning, as negative character traits or transgressive impulses (“the evil inclination,” “worldly desires,” “hatred,” “the passion for idolatry”), and the narrow meaning, as sexual desire (“sensual passion,” “lust,” “temptation,” “the senses,” “the sensual desire,” “tempter to sexual indulgence” (Jastrow 590). A midrashic tradition links *yetser hara* to men’s effeminate, sexually provocative behavior that is supposed to express or attract sexual desire: “The *yetser hara* does not walk by the sides, rather, it walks in the middle of the square, and the moment it sees a man rolling his eyes, fixing his hair, and lifting his heel, it says: ‘this one is mine!’” (Gen. Rabbah 22.6; Cf. Gen. Rabbah 84.7 and b.Ketubot 54a). Singer’s “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” exemplifies the use of *yetser hara* (translated as “evil impulses”) as referring to sexual desire in modern Jewish literature: “‘So she doesn’t appeal to you?’ ‘Not particularly.’ ‘Yet if she wanted you, you wouldn’t turn her down.’ ‘I can do without her.’ ‘Don’t you have evil impulses?’” (“Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 443). In the Yiddish original: *host gornisht keyn yeytzer-hora, ha?* “Don’t you have *yetser hara* at all, or what?” (Singer, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur” 136; my translation).

of masculinity as sexual self-control, in a manner that is close to the Greco-Roman philosophical traditions: “Who is strong? He who conquers his [sexual] desire (*yitsro*)” (m.Avot 4.1). Torah study is said to be the cure when sexual desire overpowers a Jewish man (y.Berakhot 4.1, 7d; y.Sukkot 5.2, 55b; b.Berakhot 5a; b.Sukkot 52a-b; b.Kiddushin 30b; b.Sanhedrin 107a). The Study Hall is imagined as a desexualized space where sexual desire necessarily loses its power (b.Kiddushin 30b; b.Sukkah 52b; Gen. Rabbah 22.6). Various midrashim also emphasize sexual self-restraint of biblical figures such as Joseph (b.Sotah 36b; b.Avodah Zarah 3a), Moses (Sifre Numbers 99-100; b.Shabbat 87a), or Noah (Gen. Rabbah 35.1). Some other rabbinic traditions show a more positive, albeit paradoxical stance toward sexual desire: “the Evil Desire is very good,” because “without the Evil Desire no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children” (Gen. Rabbah on Gen. 1.31; b.Yoma 69b). While this tradition restricts the benefits of sexual desire to the necessity for procreation (cf. b.Yoma 69b), it also represents rabbinic dialectics of sexual desire (Boyarin, *Carnal* 61, 66): this desire is at once evil and good. Some rabbinic traditions suggest that the desire is one: the same passion that in the Study-House drives a scholar to Torah study would in bed lead him to have sex with his wife or, in another situation, with a woman to whom he is not married (Boyarin, *Carnal* 65). Some rabbinic traditions go further and suggest that the “Good Desire” for Torah study produces or strengthens “the Evil Desire” for sexual pleasure: “the greater the scholar the greater is his desire (*yetser hara*)” (b.Sukkah 52a). This saying could be seen as an effort to make sexual desire serve both the Torah study and procreation (Biale 35). Boyarin offers a Foucauldian reading of this tradition, suggesting that “one who is greater in Torah than his fellow has greater sexual desire as well” because “the study of Torah, with its system of controls on sexuality, arouses and strengthens desire as effectively as (or even more effectively than) it restrains and constrains it” (*Carnal* 65–

66). In light of this reading, the “Good Desire,” *yetser tov*, the passion for Torah study, can generate and proliferate “the Evil Desire,” *yetser hara*. In other words, the ancient rabbis claim that Jewish scholarship increases or incites sexual desire. This rabbinic saying could be seen as a recognition of an erotic energy inherent in the Torah study. Sexual desire and Jewish scholarship are thus two forms of one desire that are intimately intertwined and inform one another. The view of sexuality and Torah as one is exemplified in the talmudic story of a disciple hiding under the bed of his teacher to learn about sexual behavior, “because it is also Torah” (b.Berakhot 62a).

A series of rabbinic stories contrast Torah study with marital obligations, e.g., the story of Ben-Azzai who preferred Torah study to getting married, even if it violated the commandment to procreate:

Ben-Azzai says, “Anyone who does not engage in procreation is a murderer and diminishes the divine image” [...] Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said to him: “Ben-Azzai, words are fine when accompanied by practice... You interpret well, but do not behave well.” Ben-Azzai said, “What shall I do? My soul desires Torah. Let the world continue by the efforts of others!” (t.Yevamot 8.7; b.Yevamot 63b)

When describing his desire for Torah, Ben-Azzai uses the same word, *heshkah*, that in other contexts denotes erotic desire, *heshek* (Boyarin, *Carnal* 135). This story may suggest an intimate relationship between a Torah scholar and the Torah that he studies to the extent that Torah substitutes for the actual wife. Ben-Azzai’s statement is commonly understood that Ben-Azzai abstained from sex and refused to get married due to his love for Torah study. The ability to dedicate one’s entire being to studying Torah constitutes the ideal masculinity and the ultimate goal of life in the rabbinic mind. The ancient rabbis (b.Yoma 69b) understand, however, that this ideal is not realistic and, moreover, that it could be destructive (Boyarin, *Carnal* 61–63). Given

the limits of asceticism in rabbinic Judaism, however, and the fact that sexual renunciation was typically not an option in rabbinic culture (Boyarin, *Carnal* 48; Satlow, *Tasting* 244), the image of Ben-Azzai is ambiguous. It may represent a minority tradition that accepted a possibility of celibacy. It may also suggest a different shape of Ben Azzai's erotic desires, alternative to the dominant dichotomy of marriage or celibacy offered by the mainstream culture. The story of Ben Azzai allows for an understanding of Torah study as the sublimation of same-sex sexual desires or even as a metaphor for these desires, which are in an opposition to the institution of heterosexual marriage.

The legends about scholars abandoning their wives in order to study Torah (b.Nedarim 50a; b.Ketubot 63a) present scholarship and marital obligations as mutually exclusive, while raising ethical concerns about the effects of this masculine ideal on women. The rabbinic discussions of the sexual obligations of Torah students to their wives, *'onah* (m.Ketubot 5.6; b.Ketubot 61b-62b), were intended to protect women from neglect in favor of Torah study (and in favor of other wives in a polygamous society). Rubenstein notes that the laws of conjugal duty suggest that "Torah study competes with the wife for the erotic attention of her scholarly husband" (*Culture* 105).

The rabbinic notion of eroticism of study and the analogy between Torah study and sex has been noted in critical scholarship (e.g., Rubenstein, *Culture* 118–20). Some rabbinic traditions present the Torah and the Talmud as sex manuals, often in a disturbingly misogynistic manner. For example, a Tannaitic source explains the exclusion of women from the study of Torah on the grounds that it would teach them "lasciviousness" (m.Sotah 3.4). A similar Amoraic tradition (y.Sotah 3.4, 20a) imagines learned women attempting to seduce men by reciting to them suggestive biblical verses (Satlow 163; Boyarin, *Carnal* 134–66). Some rabbinic texts, indeed,

offer the reader sex manuals, disguised as discussions of modesty in sexual relations (b.Nedarim 20a-b).

At times, the ancient rabbis depict Torah study itself as sexual activity: “Whoever engages in the study of Torah in the presence of an ignoramus (*am ha-arets*) is like one who has intercourse (*bo’el*) with his bride in his presence” (b.Pesahim 49b). This metaphor exemplifies exhibitionist-voyeuristic sexualization of the intellectual pursuits. As Rubenstein formulates, “Within the walls of the academy the sages are intimate with their beloved Torah; to take Torah outside smacks of exhibitionism” (*Culture* 138). This text strikingly represents a form of Torah study as a transgressive activity. In this rabbinic statement, the Torah is analogous to a sexual partner, the bride. The process of learning is imagined as isomorphic to sexual intercourse. Similar to the sexual practice, Torah study is expected to arouse an outsider’s sexual desire. The act of watching scholars studying becomes an act of erotic gaze.⁹⁶ This metaphor is possible because of the rabbinic understanding of the intellectual process in sexualized terms and because of the view of intimacy between scholars as analogous to sexual intimacy: the analogy with sexual intercourse may equally apply to the relationship between the student and the text or to the relationship between scholars studying the Torah together, perhaps in pairs. The spectator, an uneducated outsider, disrupts both forms of intimacy. The apparent conflation of eros and sexuality creates a kind of ambiguity that opens a door to the readings presented here, intended or not.

⁹⁶ Alternatively, this statement could be seen as another example of gatekeeping by the rabbinic intellectual elite. This rabbinic tradition is part of the larger discussion of the uneasy relationship between the rabbis and “ignoramus” in b.Pesahim 49b, a discussion that demonstrates extreme animosity between these two groups (which may reflect class differences or power struggle between competitive groups). In this context, it may be the outsider’s possible desire for Torah study, the desire to join the elite that concerns the rabbis.

Many rabbinic traditions imagine the Torah as the metaphorical female lover of male Torah scholars or students (Boyarin, *Carnal* 188). The rabbis often imagine Torah as competing with the scholar's wife as the object of desire and affection, as "the other woman," and passion for Torah as "lusting after learning" (Boyarin, *Carnal* 134). This motif is evident in the rabbinic interpretations of the erotic imagery of the Song of Songs as referring to the Torah or Torah study.⁹⁷ For example, the rabbis draw analogies between parts of the sexualized woman's body and the books of the Torah: "'your belly'—refers to the book of Leviticus; 'between the heart and the legs'—two books before and two books after" (Song of Sg. Rabbah 7.3). Some other metaphors, derived from the biblical love poetry, too, offer erotic descriptions of Torah as the woman's body seen through the eyes of her lover: "The school of Rav Anan taught: What is [the meaning of] the verse, 'Your rounded thighs are like jewels' (Song of Sg. 7.2)? Why are words of Torah compared to the thigh? Just as a thigh is hidden, so words of Torah should be [studied] in private" (b.Sukkah 49b). Whereas in the Song of Songs the erotic praise is addressed to a human lover (the biblical text refers to the woman's beauty praised by her male lover), the Talmud reads this verse as addressed to the text of the Torah. The ancient rabbis understand this image as referring to the Torah engaged in an intimate play with the scholars. They represent the text as the eroticized body and Torah study as an intimate experience. Rubenstein points to the ancient

⁹⁷ These midrashim interpret the eroticism of the Song of Songs as a metaphor for Israel's relation to God and, by association, the Torah. Sontag cites rabbinic and Christian allegorical, spiritualizing interpretations of the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs as "notorious examples" of interpretation that erases the text's erotic appeal (98). Sontag, however, overlooks the eroticism of the rabbinic commentaries. For detailed discussions of the homoerotic character of these rabbinic commentaries on Song, see Howard I. Schwartz; Moore. Moore points out that, although "the allegorical readings can themselves be read as discourses of sexual repression," they can also be read "as discourses of sexual *expression*—and of 'deviant' sexual expression, at that" (22–23; author's italics). Moore points to the homoeroticizing move of the rabbinic and Christian biblical interpretations: "But whereas the enabling assumption of the literal readings is that the Song concerns the mutual attraction between a man and a woman, the enabling assumption of the allegorical readings is that the Song concerns the mutual attraction between two males" (27). This means that "allegorical exegesis of the Song thereby becomes a sanctioned space—a stage, indeed—for some decidedly queer performances" (Moore 28).

rabbis' "view of Torah study as an erotic, hence private, activity" as the basis of this talmudic tradition (*Culture* 119). A similar tradition constructs a more graphic erotic image of the Torah:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "A loving doe, a graceful mountain goat. Let her breasts satisfy you at all times. Be infatuated with her love always" (Prov. 5.19)? Why are words of Torah compared to a doe? Just as a doe has a tight vagina, and is beloved to her mate each time just like the first time, so words of Torah are beloved to those who study them each time just like the first time. (b.Eruvin 54b; cf. b.Yoma 29a)

This image compares the text of the Torah to the sexualized female body (with the breasts and the vagina), employing the male fantasy of female virginity. Rubenstein notes: "Not only is the analogy between study and sex made explicit, but Torah study compares to the best type of sex (at least according to this common male fantasy)" (*Culture* 119). These traditions represent the process of Torah study as lovemaking, experiencing intellectual and sexual pleasures as isomorphic.⁹⁸

A number of traditions depict the Torah as the scholar's bride or wife. For example, the following tradition imagines the Torah as the bride of the Jewish men: "'Torah, the inheritance (*morasha*) of the congregation of Jacob' (Deut. 33.4). Do not read *morasha* (inheritance) but *meorasa* (betrothed)" (b.Pesakhim 49b). A similar tradition imagines studying the Torah as sex with a woman betrothed to another man: "One who has intercourse with a betrothed (*meorasa*)

⁹⁸ Erotic dimensions of Jewish intellectual life have not been unnoticed in later Jewish tradition. Thus, medieval Jewish mystics highlight the erotic character of hermeneutical activity. Zoharic literature conceptualizes biblical exegesis as isomorphic to the conjugal sex, understanding the structure of the two experiences as identical (Wolfson 320). Wolfson points to "the zoharic understanding of text as body, which provides the mechanism by which the body is understood as text" (259). See also the art of Simeon Solomon, a Victorian Jewish homosexual artist associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, in particular, the erotic, intimate image of the Torah in his 1867 painting *Carrying the Scrolls of Law*.

maiden [in his dream] should expect [greatness] in Torah” (b.Berakhot 57a). Accordingly, the rabbis represent interruptions in one’s engagement with the text as adultery. For instance, “‘He who commits adultery is devoid of understanding’ (Prov. 6.32). Resh Lakish said: This refers to one who studies Torah at intervals” (b.Sanhedrin 99b). Some traditions develop the analogy between the Torah and the wife to the extent that they represent the Torah as the scholar’s true wife and the relationship with his actual, human wife as sexually transgressive, as adultery (b.Sanhedrin 99b; b.Ketubot 63a). These traditions also reflect on the damaging effects of the male scholars’ commitment to Torah study on women, which can be seen in numerous stories about abandoned wives. A story of Rav Rahumi portrays a sage who is so attracted to the Torah emotionally and erotically that he abandons his wife (b.Ketubot 63a). A discussion how long a Torah scholar may leave his wife in order to study concludes with a disturbing story of Rav Yosef, the son of a leading sage, Rava. When, after three years of studying, Rav Yosef wanted to take a break from his studies and to visit his wife (“I will go and see my family”), his father threatened him with an axe, saying “Did you remember your whore?” (b.Ketubot 63a). The more known legend about Rabbi Akiva who abandoned his wife for twenty-four years in order to study Torah (b.Nedarim 50a), too, presents scholarship and marital obligations as mutually exclusive. These traditions raise questions about the effects of this masculine ideal on women. These traditions are in line with some other rabbinic sources that represent wives as obstacles to studying (e.g., b.Berakhot 27b-28a; b.Bava Metsia 84b), thus conceptualizing marriage and Torah study as competing commitments and as analogous activities. For the ancient rabbis, the Torah and the actual, human wife competed for the right to be the scholar’s appropriate object of love, the legitimate sexual object (Rubenstein, *Culture* 114, 120; Weiss and Stav 4, 79).

While the sexualized images of the Torah in rabbinic literature are generally heteroerotic, there are also homoerotic images. For instance, some rabbinic interpretations of the Song of Songs identify the Torah with the body of the male lover of the biblical erotic poetry: “‘His head’ is the Torah; ‘his locks are curled’: this refers to the ruled lines in the Torah scroll; [his locks are] ‘black as a raven’: this refers to the letters of the Torah” (Song of Sg. Rabbah 5.11). Some other rabbinic traditions imagine giving Torah at Mount Sinai to the male Israelites as God’s kisses (Midrash Exod. Rabbah 41.3), which employs the erotic imagery of Song of Songs (Song of Sg.1.2). They also imagine the Oral Torah as the tongue and lips of God or those of a Torah scholar. These traditions represent the process of Torah study as lovemaking between the male Torah scholar and the male God. Moore suggests that to the rabbis “the Torah scroll is also God’s phallus, the ultimate symbol of his authority” (35). Handelman makes a conceptual connection between the image of Torah as lover and the intimacy between teachers and students: “So in Oral Torah, teacher and student are also lovers of the Torah, as intimate with it as are husband and wife—and through Torah, lovers of each other and God” (10). This conceptual connection could also be applied to the intimacy between Torah scholars or between students.

3.3.2 Study Partnership as Metaphorical Marriage

A number of features suggest parallels between the traditional *havruta* and marriage: it is a long-term relationship that is committed and exclusive, usually as a pair/couple, with expected intimacy. Not surprisingly, some traditional Jewish sources represent study partnership as a metaphorical marriage, either between scholars and the Torah or between study partners.⁹⁹ This metaphor represents Torah study as an alternative to the institution of marriage.

⁹⁹ One can argue that traditional Jewish sources generally disapprove of the idea of same-sex marriage. A Tannaitic tradition reads the biblical warning against copying “the practices of the land of Egypt and of the land of Canaan” (Lev. 18.3) as referring to non-normative marriages, including those between two men or between two women,

As the previous section demonstrates, rabbinic literature often viewed Torah study as competing with heteronormative marriage. Yet it also viewed study partnership as the alternative to marriage. Boyarin asserts that “the absolute and contradictory demands of marriage and commitment to study of Torah remained one of the great unresolved tensions of rabbinic culture” (*Carnal* 134). As Satlow notes, in rabbinic culture the eroticized study of Torah was “in constant tension with, and occasionally superseded, marital duties” (314). Satlow points to a similar tension between philosophy and passion in the contemporaneous Greco-Roman world, which

among other transgressions such as incest and polyandry: “What did they [the Egyptians and the Canaanites] do? A man would marry a man, and a woman, a woman. A man would marry a woman and her daughter, and a woman would marry two [men]” (Sifra on Lev. 18.3, Acharei Mot 8.8; my translation). Midrash Rabbah presents two versions of a similar tradition, linking the theme of foreign practices with the story of the Flood: “The generation of the Flood was only wiped out from the world because they wrote *gomasiyot* for [two] males or [two] females” (Lev. Rabbah 23.9; my translation); “the generation of the Flood was not wiped out from the world until they wrote *gimomsiyot* for [unions with] males or animals” (Gen. Rabbah 26.5; my translation). Kosman and Sharbat (11, 44) argue that the Sifra suggests the expansive interpretation of the Levitical ban as prohibiting same-sex unions (and not only specific sexual acts between males). Kosman and Sharbat read the tradition in Sifra in light of some ascetic trends in medieval and early modern halakhic literature (such as the interpretations of Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Forbidden Intercourse” 21.8, and Epstein in *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, “Marriage Law” 20.18) and thus superimpose later discourses upon the ancient texts. The meaning of the disapproved practice in all these midrashim is unclear. The term “marrying” in Sifra may denote marriage-like unions or it could be a euphemism for sexual relations. Including same-sex unions among other transgressions such as incest and polyandry suggests the larger meaning of transgressing the patriarchal power structures. In Midrash Rabbah, the obscure term *gomasiyot* (or a variant form *gimomsiyot*) may mean marriage contracts, wedding songs, or erotic poetry, “coupling songs” (Jastrow 252). Hence, these midrashim may refer to either formal marriage-like same-sex unions or to poetic expressions of homoerotic desire in same-sex sexual relationships. Whereas Leviticus Rabbah expands the condemnation to both male-male and female-female relationships, Genesis Rabbah only mentions unions between males. The Midrash Rabba identifies the practices of the Canaanites with the sins of the generation of the Flood and with the sin of the Sodomites, interpreting the legal warnings in Leviticus and the narratives in Genesis as referring to God’s punishment for sexual sins (*zenut*, “fornication”). I suggest that several features of these midrashim, which are at odds with the rest of rabbinic traditions, point to the Hellenistic or early Christian context of their writing or redaction: (a) the sexualized reading of the Sodom myth (Midrash Rabbah associates the sin of the Sodomites with “fornication,” *zenut*, and with “sexual intercourse,” *tashmish*), which was characteristic of Jewish Hellenistic exegesis and patristic writings and which departed from the dominant Jewish tradition of reading the Sodom story; (b) the theme of natural disasters as God’s punishment for sexual licentiousness, which appeared in the Byzantine legal and theological discourses; and (c) the extensive use of vocabulary borrowed from Greek. See also the theory of the Palestinian-Babylonian disparity on the matter of sexual desire and the body (Boyarin, *Carnal*; Satlow, *Tasting*; Biale), which can explain the ascetic trends in the Palestinian rabbinic traditions that at times adopted the Hellenistic soul/body dualism. Another Amoraic tradition claims that non-Jews “do not write a marriage contract (*ketubah*) for [two] males” (b.Hulin 92a-b). Some ancient rabbis read the phrase in Gen. 2.24 “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” as “not to the wife of his neighbor and not to a male and not to an animal” (b.Sanhedrin 58a; see also y.Kiddushin 1.1, 58c; Gen. Rabbah 18.24; Rashi adopts this interpretation in his commentary to Genesis). It is unclear whether “to cling” in these biblical and rabbinic contexts means marriage, sexual intercourse, or sexual intimacy in general. Apparently, the midrashic traditions mentioned above that allegedly condemn same-sex unions refer to the Levitical prohibition of the sexual act between males. Their concern is the confusion of gender roles or excessive, non-procreative bodily pleasure.

could influence Jewish culture of late antiquity (*Tasting* 314). Hence, the tension between the rabbinic ideal of Torah study and the demand for procreation through marriage (as well as the attempts to control male sexual desire) in post-biblical Judaism, which, arguably, could manifest a tension between ascetic and erotic impulses, can explain the role of eroticizing the study of Torah in rabbinic traditions, as well as the motif of lusting after learning and imagining the Torah as the other woman (Boyarin, *Carnal* 134; Satlow, *Tasting* 314; Rubenstein, *Culture* 102–22). Howard I. Schwartz suggests that in rabbinic Judaism Torah study and the asceticism associated with it was an alternative to biological procreation and to genealogical descent, in this way at once disrupting and conforming to the ideology of reproduction (222). Rubenstein suggests that the tension between Torah study and family in rabbinic culture was rooted in the male homosocial character of Torah study and in the exclusion of women from this activity (*Culture* 102). This tension manifests itself in the figure of Ben Azzai, a talmudic rabbi who remained unmarried in his devotion to the Torah study, presumably preferring the love of Torah to the love of women (see my discussion earlier). As my discussion later shows, the talmudic legend of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a exemplifies the ambiguity of rabbinic intellectual culture. It conveys the rabbis' uncertainty on whether the intimacy of study partnership resolves the tension between the contradictory demands of marriage and Torah study or whether it reinforces that tension.

As mentioned earlier, the images of the intimacy between study partners such as those in Avot 1.6 and 6.6 and in Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3 use a language that suggests analogies with marriage. These analogies were recognized and expanded in Jewish interpretive tradition. Some commentators such as Abarbanel in *Nahalat Avot* (late fifteenth century) and Samuel de Uceda in *Midrash Shmuel* (mid-sixteenth century) cite a tradition that describes the connection between

study partners as that of wives towards their husbands. These commentators explicate that “even the smartest man needs the partner’s advice” and “even the most educated among the educated (*hamaskil shebemaskilim*)” needs a study partner in the same way as “[even] the most chaste (*haksherah*) of women needs a husband” (*Nahalat Avot* on Avot 1:6, 5; *Midrash Shmuel* on Avot 1.7, 12; my translations). Abarbanel attributes this statement to “philosophers,” *hokhmei hafilosofia* (*Nahalat Avot* on Avot 1.6, 5), whereas Samuel de Uceda to “the sages of the tradition,” *hokhmei hamusar* (*Midrash Shmuel* on Avot 1.7, 12). The phrase “[even] the most chaste woman needs a husband” first appears in *Mivhar HaPeninim*, an eleventh-century Jewish work on ethics attributed to Solomon ibn Gabirol (*Mivhar HaPeninim* 21.268). Abarbanel and Samuel de Uceda turn this heteronormative statement into a homoerotic analogy between a study partner and a wife. *Midrash Shmuel* explains the requirement of “acquiring a good study partner” (*kinyan hehaver tov*) in terms of love relationship: “because a loving partner (*haver ohev*) corrects his affairs with advice” (*Midrash Shmuel* on Avot 1.7, 12; my translation).

Abarbanel also connects *havruta* to the biblical story of Adam and Eve: “It is said in the Talmud (b.Taanit 23a): ‘Either *havruta* or death’ because ‘it is not good for a person to be alone’ [Gen. 2.18])” (*Nahalat Avot* on Avot 1:6, 4). The biblical verse describes the creation of woman as Adam’s partner: “God said, ‘It is not good for the Human to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart [*ezer kenegdo*] for him’ (Gen. 2.18). In Jewish tradition, this verse became the basis for the halakhic obligation for a man to marry: “It is prohibited for a man to be without a wife, as it is written, ‘It is not good for the Human to be alone’” (b.Yevamot 61b; Tur, Even HaEzer 1.1; Arukh HaShulchan, Even HaEzer 1.1, 1.7; cf. t.Ketubot 6:9; b.Ketubot 67b; b.Kiddushin 6a; b.Yevamot 62b).

Some other rabbinic traditions compare a male Torah scholar to a bride who is being married to the Torah or to a fellow male Torah scholar. Thus, the rabbis depict ordination celebrations of male rabbis in a context of a discussion of wedding celebrations. These rituals that mimic weddings (Adler, “Virgin” 32) suggest analogies between a rabbinical ordination and a wedding, as well as between a male Torah scholar and a bride. In a talmudic discussion, the school of Hillel prescribes praising the bride’s beauty at a wedding, calling her “a beautiful and graceful bride (*kalah na’ah vahasudah*)” even if the bride was not beautiful, to still make her attractive in the eyes of her groom. To support this ruling, the Talmud cites a custom of the Palestinian Jewish communities, which was adopted by the Babylonian rabbis, to sing a wedding song that praises the natural beauty of the bride who is not in need of cosmetics: “No kohl, no rouge, no waved hair and still a graceful gazelle” (b.Ketubot 17a). The talmudic narrative reveals that these wedding customs were sometimes used at the ordination ceremonies of the rabbis:

When the Sages ordained Rabbi Zera, they sang to him this: “No kohl, no rouge, no waved hair and still a graceful gazelle.” When the Sages ordained Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Assi, they sang to them this: “Everyone here and everyone there, ordain them for us. Do not ordain for us others, neither from the corrupt, nor from the worthless.” And some say: “Not from those of one-fifth [of reasoning] and not from those of incomplete [knowledge].” (b. Ketubot 17a)

In this talmudic account of Rabbi Zera’s ordination, the rabbis praise Rabbi Zera’s beauty using a popular wedding song that would refer to a bride: “No kohl, no rouge, no waved hair and still a graceful gazelle (*ya’alat hen*)” (b.Ketubot 17a). In the context of this talmudic discussion, one may wonder if the purpose of this song remains to emphasize the physical attractiveness of Rabbi Zera, which is, apparently, deemed valuable for a male Torah scholar in becoming an

ordained rabbi as it is for a woman in becoming married. As, according to the ancient rabbis, a bride should be attractive to her future husband, a rabbi should be attractive to his male colleagues and study partners who embody the Torah or to the female Torah he is studying with them, or to the male God, whom the Torah represents.

This tradition also depicts the joint celebration of the ordination of Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi reminiscent of a wedding (b.Ketubot 17a). Rabbi Ami's and Rabbi Assi's ordination ceremony includes wedding rituals such as singing praise songs for the bride and groom, yet the song shifts from referring to a physical beauty towards their intellectual and moral merits. The knowledge of Torah scholars makes them attractive to their fellow rabbis and to one another in the same way a physical beauty makes a bride attractive to her groom. Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Assi are almost always mentioned in the Talmud as a pair producing legal decisions together. The joint ordination of these two study partners makes the wedding analogy more pronounced, since in this case the song is for a couple. Historically, this union represents a celebration of intellectual bonds between the ancient rabbis, yet, in the context of this talmudic page, it also parallels the affective and erotic bonds of a married couple. A queer reading would suggest that it is a ceremony that can be perceived as a celebration of the commitment between study partners, a kind of a same-sex union.

3.4 Rabbinic Masculinity and Constructions of Homoeroticized Intellectualism

The rabbinic ideas of masculinity include the eroticized images of male Torah scholars and the motif of male homoerotic lineage. These traditions represent the self-image of the rabbis as "beautiful and learned," constructing the rabbinic ideal of manliness through a fundamental connection between homomale visual erotics and knowledge acquisition. The motif of male beauty plays an important role in midrashic commentaries on the biblical texts and in talmudic

tales about the sages. A series of stories about Rabbi Yohanan's beauty (what I call the "Rabbi Yohanan Cycle") in b.Bava Metsia 84a employs the idea of homoerotic lineage that echoes Plato's concept of intellectual procreation by way of erotic contemplation that leads to spiritual transformation. In the Talmud, this idea serves to affirm the survival and reproducibility of the rabbinic culture.

3.4.1 "Beautiful and Learned": The Ideal Self-Images of the Rabbis

Boyarin notes that Torah study, including the homosocial bonding of the Study House, is "the quintessential performance of rabbinic Jewish maleness" (*Unheroic* 143). Using Butler's notion of the performativity of gender, Boyarin notes that the rabbinic practice of studying Torah constitutes the stylized repetitions that produce rabbinic masculinity, which is "significantly like Roman femininity" (*Unheroic* 142), with studying Torah as "a kind of cross-dressing" from the perspective of Roman (and later Western) cultural norms (*Unheroic* 143). In what follows, I discuss how this production of rabbinic masculinity through learning and homosociality constructs (and is constructed by) a specific form of homoeroticism, as a rabbinic conversation with the dominant Roman culture that involves the themes of male beauty and desire.

The recurrent theme of male beauty attributed to Torah scholars plays a key role in numerous rabbinic discourses. In the way of the ancient rabbis' self-fashioning, many rabbinic traditions construct the ideal of Jewish manhood as predicated at once on physical beauty and on cerebral genius. According to these traditions, the erotic and the intellectual are two interdependent components of the rabbinic ideal of masculinity. As Stephen Moore formulates it, the ancient rabbis convey the message that "scholarship is sexy" (32). The rabbinic notions of beauty can be

problematic since they are typically predicated upon androcentric assumptions.¹⁰⁰ Moore points to the problematic “ideology of beauty” as equation of beauty with holiness, looks with worth, cultural conflation of beauty and virtue (38–39). The images of the rabbis’ beauty could be understood in light of two cultural contexts, biblical and Greco-Roman. The rabbinic connections to the biblical images of male beauty and the association of male beauty with the themes of royalty and sacredness serve to affirm the rabbis’ claim to authority as the heirs of the biblical kings and heroes. These images also serve to represent the rabbis’ close connection to the divine. Howard I. Schwartz points out that “a masculine god is a kind of male beauty image, an image of male perfection against which men measure themselves and in terms of which they fall short” (17). Neis suggests that the ancient rabbis constructed their own bodies as objects of sacred visuality by attempts “to steer Jewish eyes away from ‘idols,’ and towards their own (sagely) persons as ‘icons’ of the sacred,” as embodied representations of the divine (*Sense* 11). Just like the Greek and Roman philosophers, the ancient rabbis associated the beauty of male body with spiritual perfection and with scholarship.

In the Hebrew Bible, beauty is typically an important attribute of kings and heroes, a symbol of royal authority and power (Brettler, *God* 72). Jennings points out that in the Hebrew Bible the choice of a king or a hero was often made on physical beauty (8).¹⁰¹ The beauty of Joseph (Gen. 37-45 and particularly Gen. 39.6-7), Saul (1 Sam. 9.1-2), David (1 Sam. 16.12; 14-23; 17.38-42),

¹⁰⁰ Kessler also points to what can be viewed from a modern perspective as ableist and racist assumptions that underlie some rabbinic ideas of beauty (“Let’s Cross”). Exploring these issues is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

¹⁰¹ See also Howard I. Schwartz’s discussion of numerous biblical passages that show a link between the male gaze and desire in the ancient Israelite imagination (such as the narratives of Abram and Sarai in Gen. 12.11, 14; Shechem and Dinah in Gen. 34.2; David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 11.2-4) or, less frequent, the female gaze, e.g., Potiphar’s wife and Joseph in Gen. 39.7; the harlot in Ezek. 23.26; the female lover in the Song of Songs (5.10 et passim). Howard I. Schwartz’s claim of absence of male gazing at another man in biblical texts (91, 96–97) overlooks the examples mentioned above.

or Absalom (2 Sam. 14.25) plays the central role in their rise to power, serving as a sign of being chosen by God or by powerful men and women, or in gaining popularity among their supporters (Lefkovitz 91; Goldman 80; Speiser; Jennings 6). Sometimes the eroticized male beauty represents foreign political powers, such as the Assyrian cavalry officers in Ezek. 23.23.

The rabbinic narratives often meditate on, allude to, or expand the biblical imagery of male beauty. For example, some midrashim exaggerate Joseph's beauty by commenting on the biblical verse "Joseph was well built and handsome" (Gen. 39.6) and imagining Joseph "standing in the marketplace, grooming his eyes, curling his hair, and lifting his heels" (Gen. Rabba 87.3; cf. 84.7) and thus making himself available for sexual gaze, whether female or male (such as those of Potiphar's wife or Potiphar himself).¹⁰² In a talmudic tale, Rabbi Yohanan compares his own beauty to the beauty of the biblical Joseph: "I come from the descendants of Joseph, over whom the Evil Eye has no power" (b.Bava Metsia 84a). Some traditions in the Talmud and in the Midrash bring together biblical characters (such as Adam, Jacob, Joseph, David, and Josiah) and talmudic sages (such as Rabbi Yohanan, Rabbi Ishmael, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Yeshevav, Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava, Rav Kahana, and Rabbi Abbahu, or the rabbis as a collective) on the grounds of their shared beauty, placing all of them in a category of "the beauties of Jacob" (Lam. Rabbah 2.4) or "the beautiful men of Jerusalem" (b.Bava Metsia 84a). The image of the "beautiful men of Jerusalem" (*shefirei yerushalayim*) in b.Bava Metsia 84a parallels the midrashic traditions that depict the beauty of "men of Jerusalem" (*anshei yerushalayim*) "who were like an ornament of gold, and their bodies were like beautiful gems and pearls" (Lam. Rabbah 4.1). A talmudic text interprets a biblical verse, "the precious sons of Zion, comparable

¹⁰² Lefkovitz assumes that this behavior represents Joseph's effeminacy (89). The midrashim, however, depict it as a masculine practice characteristic of a hero (*gibor* in Gen. Rabba 87.3) or a male youth (*na'ar* in Gen. Rabba 84.7).

to fine gold” (Lam. 4.2), as referring to the physical beauty of “the sons of Zion”: “What is the meaning of the expression ‘comparable to fine gold’? That they would disgrace fine gold because of their beauty” (b.Gittin 58a). Whereas the text of Lamentations states a general idea of the preciousness of Jewish lives lost during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (their lives are as valuable as fine gold), the rabbis eroticize the biblical simile: in their reading, the physical beauty of these Jewish men is what makes them precious (their bodies are beautiful like fine gold). In a similar manner, a midrash compares the beautiful bodies of Torah scholars (*havraya*) to “sacred gems” (Lam. Rabbah 4.1) and to King Josiah whose body is compared to an ornament of gold and to a beautiful gem (Lam. Rabbah 4.1). The juxtaposition of the sages and a Judean king within the context of the same erotic simile (the beauty of the male body compared to gold and precious stones) reinforces the self-representation of the rabbis as the spiritual heirs of the Davidic kings.

The homoerotic motif of male beauty plays an important role in midrashic commentaries on the biblical texts, or what I would call the rabbinic technique of homoerotic exegesis. For instance, some rabbinic interpretations of the Song of Songs (Targum on the Songs of Sg. 1.15-16, 4.1, 4.7, 4.9, 4.11, 5.8, 5.10, 5.12-13, 5.16, 6.4, 6.9; Song of Sg. Rabbah 1.15, 2.14, 4.1, 4.11, 5.11, 7.3 and on Song of Sg. 4.5, 4.8, 4.10, 5.13)¹⁰³ imagine God’s male erotic gaze directed towards the bodies of male Torah scholars (who are sometimes metaphorically feminized) or the scholar’s erotic gaze at God’s male body. These traditions depict a male sage as God’s bride and the process of Torah study as lovemaking between the sage and God. These midrashim describe reading a text as kissing. They refer to the words of Torah as the tongue and the lips of God or those of the scholar. They depict exchanging ideas among scholars as giving and receiving

¹⁰³ For detailed discussions of these examples, see Moore (32) and Howard I. Schwartz (163–68).

sexual pleasure similar to the one between the bride and her husband. The very text of the Torah becomes the eroticized male body of God. Moore notes that, according to these rabbinic traditions, performing “textual acts” is what makes the scholars beautiful in “the rabbinic House of Study as a beauty parlor” (35). The image of God as a Torah scholar infatuated with human Torah scholars legitimizes the rabbinic culture and its values while also affirming the androcentric character of this culture as one that is “a closed community of male scholars fatally infatuated with itself” (Moore 37).

In employing the images of male beauty, rabbinic literature also adopts and resists Greco-Roman cultural conventions that emphasize a fundamental connection between homoeroticism and knowledge acquisition. As the examples below demonstrate, the talmudic and midrashic texts often discuss the images of the rabbis’ bodies in a context of a cultural and political polemic with Greco-Roman society, often in respect of masculinity and physical, intellectual, and cultural reproduction. This has received attention in critical scholarship. Boyarin discusses the rabbinic concept of reproduction through education in the context of rabbinic concerns around reproducibility of men and reproducibility of rabbinic culture (*Carnal*, chapter 7). Fonrobert discusses the rabbinic notion of education as filiation and a homology between the father–son and teacher–student relationships (such as in b.Eruvin 73b). Both relationships in the rabbinic culture were viewed as correlating, based on the gender logic of androcentrism that conceptualized both parenting and education as exclusively masculine (Fonrobert, “Education” 20). Neis argues that “homovisuality” (*Sense*, 41), an erotic sight directed at the bodies of the rabbis, was “an important vehicle for rabbinic project of *talmud torah* and reproducing rabbis” (*Sense*, 6), when “seeing the face of the sage was bound up with transmission of Torah knowledge” (*Sense*, 17).

The connection between visual erotics and reproduction, physical or intellectual and cultural, is evident in various talmudic tales that refer to a popular assumption in the ancient world that a child resembles what the mother sees prior to or at the time of conceiving, a belief that, apparently, the ancient rabbis appropriated from the surrounding cultures (Boyarin, *Carnal* 212; Satlow, *Tasting* 311–12; Neis, *When* 156). Some rabbinic traditions reference this belief as Jewish and commonly accepted among the rabbis, for example, the aggadah about Rabbi Yohanan by women’s ritual bath in b.Bava Metsia 84a that I discuss later or a midrashic tradition that a woman would see an attractive young man (*bahur*), perhaps a Torah student, in the marketplace, desire him, and have a son like him after having sex with her husband (Gen. Rabbah 26.7).¹⁰⁴ Another rabbinic tradition, however, presents this belief as Roman and foreign to Jewish culture. This talmudic text claims that Roman nobility who wished to produce beautiful offspring would engage in sexual intercourse in front of a beautiful image, but since the Great Revolt, “they would bring Jewish boys, tie them to the foot of their beds, and engage in sexual intercourse across from them” (b.Gittin 58a). This text effectively claims that Jewish males had extraordinary beauty which the Romans would want to imitate by engaging in sexual intercourse in front of their Jewish male slaves and in the same manner as they would do across from beautiful sculptures. Neis points out that this story suggests that “Roman elites were effectively reproducing Jews” through a coercive homoerotic threesome (*When* 156). This aggadah continues by telling a story of two Jewish boys who in this situation engaged in learning

¹⁰⁴ For a comparative discussion of this theme in rabbinic and Roman literatures, see Satlow *Tasting* 91, 96–97, 311–312. Satlow mentions similar tales from Roman medical manuals, for example, a story of the wife of the tyrant of the Cyprians who looked at beautiful statues during intercourse and gave birth to beautiful children or a story of women who saw monkeys during intercourse and have borne children resembling monkeys (Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.10.39, qtd. in Satlow 311–12). Neis, too, mentions that “a variety of sources testify to the technique—gazing at particular visual objects during intercourse—in human and nonhuman generation in Greek, Roman, and Persian contexts” (*When* 156). See also references to this belief in the Hebrew Bible, in particular, the story of Jacob breeding streaked, speckled, and spotted sheep and goats by placing tree branches in front of mating animals or making them face streaked or dark-colored animals (Gen. 30.37–42; cf. Gen. Rabbah 73.10).

Torah by the bed of their Roman slaveowners who were engaging in sexual intercourse (b.Gittin 58a). This tale juxtaposes sex and Torah study by presenting these two activities as isomorphic yet demonstrating a cultural antagonism: Torah study is for the Jews as sex is for the Romans. While the Roman nobles are concerned with reproducing physical beauty, the Jewish children reproduce Torah knowledge. The beauty of the Jewish boys, however, serves as a source for both types of procreation.

An ambivalence toward Greco-Roman ideas of male beauty in the ancient rabbis' imagination is expressed in the story of Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik (Simon the Righteous), and a nazirite. A young shepherd, aware of his own beauty, decides to become a nazirite, to take a temporary oath of dedication to God, for a strange reason: because, according to the biblical law, a nazirite must shave off his hair at the completion of his term and by doing so to blemish his beauty. Rabbi Shimon's response to that ascetic impulse is quite surprising as well:

One time, a man, a nazirite from the South, came [to me], and I saw that he had beautiful eyes and he was good looking, and his locks were arranged in curls. I said to him: My son, what did you see that made you decide to destroy this beautiful hair of yours? He said to me: I was a shepherd for my father in my city. I went to draw water from the spring, I gazed at my reflection in the water, and my evil inclination quickly overcame me, and it sought to expel me from the world. I said to myself: Wicked one! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours, of someone who will eventually become food for worms? I swear by the Temple service that I shall shave you for the sake of Heaven. (b.Nedarim 9b; cf. b.Nazir 4b)

This talmudic tale, which, apparently, alludes to the Greek myth of Narcissus, shows rabbinic ambivalence about male beauty. Rabbi Shimon, a priest and a leading rabbi, affirms the value of the nazirite's beauty: "My son, what did you see that made you decide to destroy this beautiful hair of yours?" In contrast, the nazirite renounces his own beauty, presenting a more ascetic tradition that emphasizes the vanity and the dangers of the physical beauty. The association of male beauty with *nazirut* in this story suggests a link between the body and the sacred realm, albeit in a complex, self-negating way. This tale links male beauty to the notions of holiness (*nazirut*) and asceticism (which is not valued in mainstream Judaism), while contesting both associations.

Similar to Plato, the ancient rabbis often represent the beauty of a Torah scholar as a necessary tool for acquiring knowledge, wisdom, and moral virtue, as a sign of spiritual connection to the divine, or as affirmation of authority and power. Contrary to the nazirite from the tale above, Rabbi Yohanan in another rabbinic legend perceives his own beauty in positive terms and quite narcissistically. The story of Rabbi Yohanan displaying his beauty to Jewish women at the gates of a ritual bath, which I discuss later in this chapter, offers a definition of the rabbinic ideal of scholarly masculinity, "beautiful and learned": "Rabbi Yohanan would go and sit by the entrance to the ritual bath. He said: When Jewish women come up from their obligatory immersion, let them meet me, so that they have sons beautiful like me and learned in Torah like me" (b.Bava Metsia 84a). This tale presents the popular Greco-Roman association of visibility and reproduction as a Jewish belief that Rabbi Yohanan upholds in making Jewish women produce beautiful (and learned, with an important rabbinic twist) sons when engaging in sex with their husbands after gazing at Rabbi Yohanan's beauty. Apparently, the tale in b.Bava Metsia 84a, which assumes the Jewish origin of this popular assumption, reflects a rabbinic

tradition that adopted popular Hellenistic beliefs and cultural norms in a greater degree than the tradition in b.Gittin 58a about Roman elite engaging in intercourse in front of beautiful statues or beautiful Jewish boys, discussed earlier, which deems this belief as foreign. This is supported by the manuscript variants of b.Bava Metsia 84a that only contain the first part (“as beautiful as me”) and omit the second one (“and learned in Torah as me”), thus borrowing the established Hellenistic trope without changes. The standard manuscript version shows that the rabbis adopted this belief with significant changes for their own cultural purposes, to emphasize two attributes of a sage, physical beauty and scholarliness, as interrelated. The rabbis see these two components as definitive for the continuity of rabbinic culture. This idea is expressed in the images of literal and metaphorical reproduction: the beauty and the intellect of Rabbi Yohanan would be reproduced in the sons conceived by these women through their erotic gaze at the sage’s beauty. Rabbi Yohanan’s physical beauty here is instrumental yet crucial: it enables the survival and continuity of the rabbinic culture.¹⁰⁵

Generally the physical beauty of the rabbis is meant to represent their spiritual strength, as a tradition in b.Bava Metsia 84a suggests by tracing the beauty of the rabbis to Adam and through him to God who made Adam in his own image. And yet, some other traditions contest this notion. According to them, it is not the Torah study that makes the body beautiful, but rather it is

¹⁰⁵ See, however, alternative traditions, that represent a polemic against the Greco-Roman association between beauty and knowledge acquisition, for example, the stories of an unattractive scholar, Rabbi Yehoshua (b.Taanit 7a-b; b.Nedarim 50b). In contrast to the story of Rabbi Yohanan in b.Bava Metsia 84a, who regards physical beauty a necessary requirement for a Torah scholar, these traditions attribute the phrase “handsome and learned” to the Roman opponents of the rabbis. In these legends, the daughter of the Roman emperor challenges Rabbi Yehoshua, referring to him as “beautiful wisdom in an ugly vessel.” In his defense, Rabbi Yehoshua, “the ugly sage,” claims that a beautiful body, due to the greater risk of lacking humility, is an obstacle for acquiring knowledge and wisdom. The emperor’s daughter (or, in a different tradition, the emperor himself) objects, “But what about those who are both handsome and learned?” Rabbi Yehoshua, however, insists on his argument: “Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned.” This legend shows a polemic against the tradition in b.Bava Metsia 84a, where both “handsome and learned” are required characteristics of a Torah scholar.

the opposite.¹⁰⁶ In some talmudic narratives, the male beauty functions to enable entering the rabbinic community and the world of Torah. For example, the stories about Rabbi Elazar's son and Rabbi Tarfon's grandson describe each of these two men as being so handsome that "every prostitute who is hired for two coins, would pay eight for him" (b.Bava Metsia 85a). The beauty of these men, which prompts prostitutes to pay to sleep with them, stands in opposition to the Torah study until Rabbi Judah the Prince, the leader of the Jewish community, referred to as Rabbi, brings them to the world of rabbinic scholarship. Rabbi Judah the Prince ordained Rabbi Elazar's son as a rabbi (even before the latter began his studies!) and sent him to study with his uncle, another Torah scholar. Rabbi also offered his daughter in marriage to Rabbi Tarfon's grandson in an attempt to make him a Torah scholar: "He said to him, 'If you return [to Torah], I will give you my daughter.' He returned" (b.Bava Metsia 85a). The theme of male beauty (or desire for it) plays a central role in these stories. A Torah scholar and the head of the Jewish community, Rabbi Judah the Prince, the editor of the Mishnah, rescues beautiful sons of other rabbis from their female suitors, prostitutes, and forces these beautiful Jewish men to become Torah scholars. In the last example, Rabbi does it by arranging a sexual relationship between his daughter and his beautiful prospective student. In his discussion of these tales, Boyarin notes that Rabbi takes Rabbi Tarfon's grandson under his wing through a displaced erotic relationship (*Carnal* 207–08). These stories suggest that beauty belongs to Torah scholars and that it plays a significant role in the continuity of rabbinic culture.

¹⁰⁶ The idea that Torah study makes one's body weaker is common in rabbinic literature. See a statement that Torah study "debilitates man's strength" (b.Sanhedrin 26b) or the stories about rabbis who lost their physical strength after studying Torah (Song of Songs Rabbah 5.14; Midrash Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 21.11). See also the depiction of Resh Lakish's loss of his physical strength after he becomes a Torah student: the mere decision to study Torah so depleted his strength that he was unable to haul his heavy equipment (b.Bava Metsia 84a).

Some rabbinic traditions go as far as to suggest the priority of the sage's physical beauty over his Torah knowledge, such as the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Elazar in b.Berakhot 5b. In this story, Rabbi Yohanan visits his student Rabbi Elazar, who had fallen ill, and finds his room too dark. To lighten the room, Rabbi Yohanan exposes the skin of his arm. The light that Rabbi Yohanan's body radiates sparks a discussion between him and his student, a discussion that affirms the value of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty.

[Rabbi Yohanan] saw that [Rabbi Elazar] was crying. He said to him: "Why are you crying? If because the Torah that you did not study, we learned: 'Some do more and some do less, as long as one directs his heart toward Heaven.' If because making living, not every person merits two tables [Torah knowledge and wealth]. If over children, this is the bone of my tenth son." [Rabbi Elazar] said to [Rabbi Yohanan]: "I am crying over this beauty [of yours] that will go to waste in the earth." [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him: "Over this, it is certainly appropriate to weep." And both cried. (b.Berakhot 5b)

The story insists that the value of the beautiful body of a scholar is greater than the value of his mind or the value of his scholarship, although it also depicts the supernatural power of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty. Both Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yohanan agree that the impermanence of Rabbi Yohanan's extraordinary beauty is a more valid reason to grieve than is Rabbi Elazar's illness, mortality, poverty, or insufficient Torah study. The physical beauty of a Torah scholar is said to be more important than wealth, children, or the Torah itself. The loss of this beauty is the only loss that cannot be explained nor comforted. The very thought of the impermanent nature of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty makes his student and himself weep. This tale also suggests that beauty has a healing power. At the end of this story Rabbi Yohanan performs a miracle and heals his student: "Meanwhile, Rabbi Yohanan said to him: 'Is your suffering dear to you?' Rabbi Elazar

said to him: ‘Neither this suffering nor its reward.’ Rabbi Yohanan said to him: ‘Give me your hand.’ Rabbi Elazar gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yohanan stood him up” (b.Berakhot 5b).¹⁰⁷ Rabbi Elazar recovers by touching Rabbi Yohanan’s hand, by connecting to the scholar’s body and to its beauty. This rabbinic text can also imply that Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty is a physical manifestation of his Torah scholarship, which is presumably greater than Rabbi Elazar’s. Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty here is superhuman. It signals his supernatural abilities that are supposed to demonstrate his spiritual power. Even the slightest sight of the scholar’s beautiful body can reveal its miraculous nature. The light of Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty symbolizes his greatness as a scholar and his ability to spread intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. The light that Rabbi Yohanan’s skin radiates alludes to the image of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the Tablets, after his close interaction with God: “So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with God” (Exod. 34.29).¹⁰⁸ This detail may suggest an implied association of Rabbi Yohanan with Moses as the Jewish leader and the keeper of the Torah. This tale, therefore, suggests an ambiguity regarding the relationship between the bodily beauty and the Torah knowledge: Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty is related to his Torah studies and yet it has an autonomous value that is greater than the value of his scholarship.

¹⁰⁷ See also other Babylonian rabbinic traditions that attribute superhuman powers to Rabbi Yohanan. For example, his blessings bring the dead to life and his curses cause death (b.Bava Metsia 84a; b.Bava Kama 117a-b; b.Shabbat 112b). Rabbi Yohanan’s colleagues show great reverence for him, similar to the conventional treatment of sacred objects (b.Yoma 53a; b.Kiddushin 71b). See, however, rabbinic accounts of Rabbi Yohanan’s suffering, his poor health and the death of his children (b.Ketubot 62a; b.Berakhot 5b), which portray him in a different, more human light.

¹⁰⁸ The translation is from *The Contemporary Torah* (Jewish Publication Society, 2006).

3.4.2 The Homoerotic Lineage: The Rabbi Yohanan Cycle in b.Bava Metsia 84a

Several stories about Rabbi Yohanan's beauty in b.Bava Metsia 84a (what I call the "Rabbi Yohanan cycle") share a motif of homoerotic lineage that participates in the rabbinic constructions of masculinity. In these narratives, the Talmud establishes the themes of the eroticized male body and sexual practices in the context of Torah scholarship and relationships between scholars. The erotic interactions in this series of rabbinic stories take place on several levels: between Jews and Romans, between men and women (Roman or Jewish), among Jewish men themselves, and between the text and the reader. The text of this talmudic page is as follows:

Elijah the prophet encountered him [Rabbi Ishmael, son of Rabbi Yose, who was a government officer responsible for arresting Jewish thieves] and said to him: Until when will you inform on the nation of our God [to be sentenced] to execution? [Rabbi Ishmael] said [to Elijah]: What should I do? It is the king's edict. [Elijah] said to him: Your father fled to Asia. You should flee to Laodicea.

When Rabbi Ishmael the son of Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon¹⁰⁹ used to meet each other, an ox could walk between them and not touch them. A certain Roman noblewoman [*matronita*] said to them, "Your children are not yours." They said, "Theirs are bigger than ours." "If that is the case, even more so!" There are those who say that thus they said to her: "As the man, so is his virility (Judg. 8.21)." And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: "Love compresses the flesh." And why did they answer her at all? Does it not say, "Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness" (Prov. 26.4)? In order not to produce slander on their children.

¹⁰⁹ Both Rabbi Ishmael the son of Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon are said to be government officers (see the previous narrative in b.Bava Metsia 83b).

Said Rabbi Yohanan, “Rabbi Ishmael the son of Rabbi Yose’s member was the size of a wineskin of nine *kav*, and Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon’s member was the size of a wineskin of seven *kav*.” Rav Papa said, “Rabbi Yohanan’s member was the size of a wineskin of five *kav*.” And some say it was the size of a wineskin of three *kav*. Rav Papa himself was like the baskets of Hipparenum.

Rabbi Yohanan would say, “I [alone] remain from the beautiful men of Jerusalem.” One who desires to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a silver goblet straight from the refiner’s shop and fill it with the seeds of a red pomegranate, and place a diadem of red roses around the lip of the goblet, and position it between the sunlight and shade. That glow is similar to the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan.

Is that so? But didn’t the master say, “The beauty of Rav Kahana is like the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu. The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of our father Jacob. The beauty of our father Jacob is like the beauty of Adam, the first man.” And Rabbi Yohanan is not included there. Rabbi Yohanan is different [from these other men] as he did not have a splendor of face [beard].

Rabbi Yohanan would go and sit by the entrance to the ritual bath. He said: “When the daughters of Israel come up from their obligatory immersion, let them meet me, so that they have sons beautiful like me and learned in Torah like me.” The rabbis said to him: “Master, are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?” He said to them: “I come from the descendants of Joseph, over whom the Evil Eye has no power, as it is written: “Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain” (Gen. 49.22); and Rabbi Abbahu says: Do not read the verse as saying: “By a fountain [*alei ayin*]”; rather, read it as: Those who rise above the evil eye [*olei ayin*]. [...]

One day Rabbi Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan River. Resh Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan after him. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: “Your strength is for the Torah.” Resh Lakish replied, “Your beauty is for women.” Rabbi Yohanan said, “If you repent, I will give you my sister, who is more beautiful than I.” Resh Lakish accepted upon himself [to study Torah]. He wanted to jump back out of the river to get his clothes, but he was unable to do so. Rabbi Yohanan taught Resh Lakish Scripture and Mishnah, and made him into a great man.

One day there was a dispute in the study hall. The sword, the knife, the dagger, the spear, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle—from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity? From the time of the completion of their manufacture. And when is the completion of their manufacture? Rabbi Yohanan says: It is from when one fires these items in the furnace. Resh Lakish said: It is from when one scours them in water [after they have been fired in the furnace]. Rabbi Yohanan said to Resh Lakish: “A bandit knows about banditry.” Resh Lakish said to Rabbi Yohanan: “And what good have you done to me? There [among bandits] they called me ‘Master’ (*rav*), and here [among scholars] they call me ‘Master’ (*rav*).” Rabbi Yohanan said to him: “I have done you good by bringing you under the wings of the Divine Presence.”

Rabbi Yohanan’s mind weakened [he felt hurt]. Resh Lakish weakened [fell ill]. Rabbi Yohanan’s sister came crying to Rabbi Yohanan. She said to him: Do this for the sake of my children.” Rabbi Yohanan said to her the verse: “Leave your orphans with Me, I will rear them” (Jer. 49.11). She said to him: “Do so for the sake of my widowhood.” He said to her the rest of the verse: “Let your widows rely on Me.”

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish died. Rabbi Yohanan was sorely pained over him. The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm Rabbi Yohanan's mind? Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp. Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yohanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yohanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: There is a teaching that supports your opinion. Rabbi Yohanan said to Eleazar ben Pedat: "Are you like the son of Lakish? When I would say something, the son of Lakish would raise twenty-four objections against me, and I would give him twenty-four answers, and the teaching would thereby be broadened. And you say: 'There is a teaching that supports your opinion.' Do I not know that what I say is right?" Rabbi Yohanan went around rending his clothes and weeping, and saying: "Where are you, son of Lakish? Where are you, son of Lakish?" And he cried out until his mind slipped from him. The rabbis pleaded for mercy on his behalf, and he died. (b.Bava Metsia 84a)¹¹⁰

The literary context of this talmudic page contains accounts of Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Ishmael serving as Roman officers who arrest Jewish criminals and who use their position of power in the Roman government to assert their authority of Torah scholars. Other rabbis (through the figure of Elijah the prophet, which, apparently, serves to emphasize the validity of their accusations) disapprove of their collaboration with the Roman authorities and question their loyalty to the Jewish people. In a dialogue with a Roman matron, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Elazar must defend themselves again, but this time against an outsider's critique who questions the rabbis' masculinity and virility. This time Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Elazar must defend

¹¹⁰ The voice of the narrator belongs to the anonymous redactors of the Babylonian Talmud, the Stammaim (Weiss Halivni; Rubenstein, *Culture*).

rabbinic culture and its ability to reproduce.¹¹¹ This text is concerned with perceived Jewish sexual difference within the context of cultural polemics between Judea and Rome. The Roman matron mocks the fat rabbis' ability to engage in intercourse with their wives and to produce children. The rabbis respond by insisting on their manliness and sexual prowess: they claim that their sexual organs are proportionate to their big bellies. The debate takes place between a woman and men, which reinforces the theme of gender identities and sexual performances. The debate takes place between Roman nobility and Jewish intellectual elite, which points to a competition between the two cultures in the context of Roman domination. The notions of masculinity, sexuality, and fertility serve to affirm cultural superiority, authority, and viability. The rabbis imagine the Roman noblewoman to question the value of rabbinic culture, the potency and the power of this culture, and the ability of this culture to procreate and to endure. Boyarin notes that this text represents anxiety over gender and procreation, centered on construction of maleness, male bodies, sexuality, and reproduction of men in rabbinic culture (*Carnal* 197–98, 204).

The focus of the talmudic page shifts to Jewish men themselves, to the rabbis who contemplate, discuss, compare, and contrast each other's bodies, penises, beards, and beauty standards. Given Rabbi Ishmael's and Rabbi Elazar's claims about their genitals, the redactors of this talmudic page compare the sizes of their sexual organs (*eivarim*)¹¹² with those of other well-endowed rabbis such as Rabbi Yohanan and Rav Papa. Rabbi Yohanan enters this talmudic

¹¹¹ See similar talmudic stories about polemics between the rabbis and Roman public figures (emperors, princesses, noblewomen), which are often organized around the body, male beauty, and sexuality, for example, stories about Romans mocking Rabbi Yehoshua's ugliness in relation to his wisdom (b.Taanit 7a-b; b.Nedarim 50b).

¹¹² The traditional commentators disagree whether in this context the "organs" mean genitals (Maharshal) or some other body parts such as the waist or thighs and upper arms (Tosafot; Ritva). Nevertheless, all the commentators agree that this story has a sexual meaning, concerned with either procreation (Tosafot) or sexual desire and self-restraint (Maharshal). Most likely "organs" here refer to genitals, male organs (Boyarin, *Carnal* 197 nn.2, 200–03), similar to other instances of using this term in biblical and rabbinic texts and in line with the context of this narrative that discusses sexuality, fertility, and virility.

narrative by commenting on the size of Rabbi Ishmael's penis, which in most manuscripts and in the printed edition of the Babylonian Talmud (Neis, *When* 158) is followed by a tradition about Rabbi Yohanan's own male organ, which is, according to this tradition, is the smallest comparable to the other rabbis. The association of masculinity with fertility and power represented by the phallus is thus affirmed yet immediately interrupted. The rest of the aggadot in this series are dedicated to discussions of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty and his relationships with other rabbis in this context.

In the next two aggadot of the Rabbi Yohanan Cycle, the erotic interactions shift again, this time taking place between the text (that portrays a Jewish man, Rabbi Yohanan) and the reader (who the redactors of the Talmud presume to be Jewish and male). Developing the theme of the rabbis' bodies, Rabbi Yohanan is said to be proud of his own beauty, claiming, "I am the last of the beautiful men of Jerusalem" (b.Bava Metsia 84a). This statement, which suggests that Rabbi Yohanan is a survivor of the destruction of Jerusalem, contradicts other rabbinic accounts that tell us that Rabbi Yohanan was born in Sepphoris and later moved to Tiberias, where he established his academy, long after the destruction of Jerusalem and the ban on Jews to reside there.¹¹³ The link of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty to Jerusalem thus seems odd if taken literally. Apparently, the talmudic text suggests that Rabbi Yohanan's appearance belongs to a distinctive category of "the beautiful men of Jerusalem" (perhaps, echoing the beauty of the "men of Jerusalem" in midrash Lam. Rabbah 4.1). The reference to Jerusalem here seems symbolic. It establishes a connection of Rabbi Yohanan to the Jewish religious, political, and cultural centre, to the Davidic dynasty, and to the location of the Temple. This connection is erotic, it is established through linking a sage's beauty to the mythical beauty of Jerusalem men. Placing

¹¹³ See Tosafot who point to this inadequacy in the talmudic text. The Tosafot explain it by suggesting that Rabbi Yohanan is a descendant of the beautiful men of Jerusalem.

Rabbi Yohanan within the homoerotic lineage of beautiful Jerusalemites serves to affirm the legitimacy and continuity of his authority in Jewish communities. Rabbi Yohanan's beauty thus signifies his status as a scholar and the authority of the rabbinic elite. For the Babylonian Jewish communities, Rabbi Yohanan often represented the Palestinian rabbinic authority *par excellence*. For example, the Babylonian Amoraim often attributed any authoritative tradition deriving from the Land of Israel to Rabbi Yohanan, whether he was the original author of the statement or not (see Wald and Gray). As such, Rabbi Yohanan personified the intellectual elite and their intimate connection to God. Many rabbinic traditions emphasize the innate nature of his piety, his loyalty to the Torah, and his special relationship with God. For example, a birth story of Rabbi Yohanan in b.Yoma 82b draws an analogy between him and the biblical prophet Jeremiah, suggesting an inherent special connection to the divine by being chosen by God before birth: "Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi read this verse about the baby she was carrying: 'Before I created you in the womb, I selected you; Before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations' (Jer. 1.5), and indeed, the baby who came out of that woman was Rabbi Yohanan" (b.Yoma 82b). This tale also borrows from the birth stories of biblical patriarchs, prophets, and heroes such as Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samson, and Samuel, among others. In so doing, this legend in b.Yoma 82b places Rabbi Yohanan in line with these biblical personalities. Some talmudic legends claim Rabbi Yohanan's key role in the succession of authority from the Tannaim to the Amoraim, for instance, attributing Rabbi Yohanan's connection to Judah the Prince, the redactor of the Mishnah (b.Hulin 137b; b.Pesahim 3b). The stories of Rabbi Yohanan and his extraordinary beauty thus represent the identity of the ancient rabbis as successors of the biblical prophets and kings, and as the new leaders of Israel, as well as the authority of the Amoraim as

the successors of the Tannaim, establishing and legitimizing the chain of authority from the Bible to the Mishnah to the Talmud.

The next piece of the Rabbi Yohanan Cycle in b.Bava Metsia 84a illustrates Rabbi Yohanan's claim by imploring the reader to contemplate his beauty of "the last one remaining from the beautiful men of Jerusalem," perhaps as a way of comprehending his high spiritual status, through a poetic and sensual image of the glowing silver goblet filled with pomegranate seeds, decorated with a diadem of red roses around the lip of the goblet, and positioned between the sunlight and shade. Neis suggests that this editorial addition was intended as instructions for a magical ritual to conjure Rabbi Yohanan's beauty for one who desires to see it and to beget Yohanan-like progeny (*When* 160). Neis points to the incantation formulation "one who wants to X, one should," to the fertility symbolism of pomegranate seeds, and to the masculinity symbolism of facial hair represented by the image of roses that "encircle" (*h.d.r.*) the goblet like a beard (*hadrat panim*, "glory of the face") "encircles" the face with hair (*When* 160). According to this reading, the subsequent talmudic discussion disrupts the gender assumptions of this image by claiming that Rabbi Yohanan did not have a beard and thus depicting the sage as effeminate, androgynous, non-gendered, or representing a singular gender (Neis, *When* 161-162).¹¹⁴ In any case, this erotic portrayal of Rabbi Yohanan's body, which imagines Rabbi Yohanan's lips to be like roses, most likely written by another ancient male rabbi, invites the intended male reader to contemplate the male scholar's beauty and, in this way, to participate in the rabbis' love relationships with each other. Ultimately, in the literary context of the talmudic page, this image of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty serves to justify Resh Lakish's attraction to him in the subsequent tale of their meeting in the Jordan river.

¹¹⁴ Sarra Lev argues that rabbinic texts both adopted and pushed back against the biblical gender binary (*Sages* 17). Whereas Strassfeld defines *androgynos* as non-binary, Lev identifies *androgynos* as intersex.

The text proceeds with a discussion of Rabbi Yohanan's place in the homoerotic lineage of the sages. The rabbis question Rabbi Yohanan's self-proclaimed status as the most beautiful man and the poetic exercises of his admirers: "Is that so?" (b.Bava Metsia 84a). The talmudic discussion returns to comparing Rabbi Yohanan's body to those of other talmudic sages, along with biblical figures, in terms of their physical attractiveness. This time the reader learns about a list of beautiful men. Apparently, the rabbis value their imagined homoerotic lineage to the extent that they keep track of their good-looking colleagues and forefathers, which aligns with the Greek (Platonic) ideal of a beautiful body reflecting a beautiful soul. This rabbinic tradition names rabbis, such as Rav Kahana and Rabbi Abbahu, and biblical personalities, such as Jacob¹¹⁵ and Adam,¹¹⁶ among beautiful men.¹¹⁷ The choice of biblical personalities in this text draws the reader's attention to a particular spiritual and erotic genealogy. The reference to Jacob the patriarch, who is in the Hebrew Bible renamed Israel and fathers the twelve tribes of Israel, positions rabbis as representatives of the entire Jewish people, through their connection to the symbolic biblical figure that signifies the entirety of the nation. This connection is one of erotic lineage, through the bodily beauty attributed to Jacob as well as to the rabbis. The reference to Adam, who in the biblical myth is created in the image of God, suggests that the beauty of the rabbis manifests their close connection to the divine, representing the beauty of God himself mirrored in the image of the first man. Rabbi Yohanan, however, is not included in this list of

¹¹⁵ Compare "the beauties of Jacob" (*neotav shel Yaakov*) that include Rabbi Ishmael, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Yeshevav, and Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava in Lam. Rabbah 2.4. The midrash, too, links the sages to the biblical Jacob-Israel and through him to the entire Jewish people using the motif of beauty as the connecting point.

¹¹⁶ Samuel Eliezer Edels (Maharsha) understands the idea of this list as setting an archetype of physical beauty that represents spiritual virtue, signifying human perfection that reflects divine perfection (since Adam is said to be created in the image of God). Following this logic, Rabbi Yohanan is excluded from this list because his beauty is nothing but physical.

¹¹⁷ Cf. a parallel talmudic tradition: "The beauty of Rav Kahana is like the beauty of Rav. The beauty of Rav is like the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu. The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of Jacob. The beauty of Jacob is like the beauty of Adam, the first man" (b.Bava Batra 58a).

male models, which disproves his self-proclaimed beauty, according to the line of this rabbinic argument.

Nevertheless, the Talmud insists on Rabbi Yohanan's extraordinary beauty and states that it is a beauty of another kind: "Rabbi Yohanan is different" from these other attractive men "because he did not have a beard," literally, "splendor of face," *hadrat panim*¹¹⁸ (b.Bava Metsia 84a).¹¹⁹ At this point, the talmudic discussion of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty mentions only two specific things about his looks: his small penis and his lack of facial hair. Both characteristics of Rabbi Yohanan's body suggest a feminized or prepubescent image of the Torah scholar. Since the talmudic text presents these characteristics as atypical for the rabbis,¹²⁰ it may reflect a polemic against dominant rabbinic norms of masculinity. It may also suggest an appropriation of Greco-Roman ideals of male beauty, pointing to the preference for beardless youths with small penises in Greek art and to the Roman custom of shaving. This text in b.Bava Metsia 84a shifts the definition of male beauty and conventions of masculinity from the size of the penis to facial hair. Indeed, beard was a sign of masculinity in the ancient Jewish culture, as one can see, for example, in the association of beard, along with having children and a wife, with manliness in b.Shabbat 152a. In the Roman and Christian cultures contemporaneous with rabbinic writings, the beard was a signifier of masculinity and social superiority, often associated with the status of philosophers (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 130 n.6). And yet, the Talmud insists that Rabbi Yohanan, who lacks a beard, represents the true ideal of male beauty, which in this case is presented as

¹¹⁸ This phrase alludes to *vehadarta pnei zaken* in Lev. 19.32, lit. "make splendor to the face of an elder," which was interpreted as an imperative to grow a beard, *zakan* (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 130 n.6). The biblical verse, in its literary context, most likely means "venerate the elder" or "follow a code of conduct in front of the elder" (my translations).

¹¹⁹ Neis suggests that the traditions that elaborate on Rabbi Yohanan's beauty (the image of the silver goblet, the comparison with other figures, and the reference to the beard) might be a later editorial layer added by the Stammaim, the anonymous editors of the Babylonian Talmud in the sixth and seventh centuries (*When* 158).

¹²⁰ This fact poses a difficulty for Boyarin's argument of the feminine image of Rabbi Yohanan as the conventional rabbinic ideal of masculinity (*Unheroic* chapter 2).

androgynous or feminized (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 130). The rabbis' confusion regarding Rabbi Yohanan's ambivalent beauty questions the conventional ideals of masculinity. The lack of a beard can suggest an androgynous, non-binary image of a sage (Neis, *When* 161-162) or, in the framework of the rabbinic law, Rabbi Yohanan's lack of facial hair (and perhaps pubic hair, "the lower beard") can also suggest his status of a eunuch, *saris*, or a nonbinary person, *androgenus* (Neis, *When* 168). In the Greco-Roman cultural context, by portraying Rabbi Yohanan as a beardless youth, *eromenos*, the younger partner of a pederastic relationship and a conventional object of erotic desire, the talmudic writers raise the question of how rabbinic scholarship can relate to Greek models of intellectual life (see my discussion later).

In the story that follows this episode, the talmudic text develops the theme of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty and his erotic appeal in a strange account of Rabbi Yohanan's erotic interaction with Jewish women by the ritual bath, *mikveh*. This tale is based on a popular in antiquity belief that the child resembles what the woman sees at the moment of conception or prior to it.¹²¹ The story draws upon the heteroeroticism of the *mikveh*. It can nevertheless be interpreted as a queer discourse. Arguably, there is a multilayered homoeroticism within this text that disrupts the heteronormative assumptions that the image of the women's *mikveh* is expected to generate. In the story of Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's meeting in the Jordan river that follows this episode, the homoeroticism of the *mikveh* becomes explicit. There are also transgressive sexual elements in this tale within its heteroerotic context and in the overlap of hetero- and homoerotic aspects of this narrative.

At the first glance, Rabbi Yohanan is portrayed as a male attracted to a female sexualized space. The setting of the narrative is explicitly sexual: preparation of women for their marital

¹²¹ Cf. Gen. 30.37-42; Gen. Rabbah 26.7 and 73.10; b.Gittin 58a. See Boyarin, *Carnal* 212; Satlow 311-12; Neis *When* 156. See also my discussion earlier in this chapter.

relations, their immersion in the *mikveh*, ritual bath, before engaging in sexual intercourse with their husbands. The ritual bath represents erotic anticipation. For women, *mikveh* is the final step in ritual preparation for marital relations, as required by the rabbinic law. The story addresses the rabbis' anxieties around the heteroerotic appeal of the women's *mikveh*, a semi-public, semi-private space where women assess their readiness for sexual intercourse. Rabbi Yohanan's practice of sitting at the gates of a women's ritual bath¹²² is transgressive on multiple accounts. Rabbi Yohanan invades a female sexual space that is typically carefully guarded against the male presence and male gaze. He gazes at married women at the time of their sexual readiness. He exposes himself to these women to show his bodily beauty to them. Whether this act of exposure involves nudity or not, it is an erotic act. He consciously seduces these married women into imagined sex with him. Rabbi Yohanan incites Jewish women to violate a rabbinic prohibition for a woman to think about another man during her marital relations with her husband and in this way to commit a virtual adultery (b.Pesahim 111a; b.Nedarim 20b; see Boyarin, *Carnal* 213). Surprisingly, Rabbi Yohanan's violation of the rabbinic law and of the rabbinic norms of modesty remains unaddressed in the talmudic text.¹²³ This tale, however, radically diverges from other rabbinic traditions that present stories about escapist rabbis, who, just like the biblical Joseph (Gen. 39.6; cf. Midrash Tanhuma Vayeshev 5.2), run away from their seductresses (e.g., b.Kiddushin 39b and 40a). Ironically, Rabbi Yohanan in this story claims to be a descendant of Joseph whose beauty was an object of the sexual gaze by a married woman, Potiphar's wife

¹²² According to Neis's reading, this text implies that Rabbi Yohanan is visible to the women during their immersion, when they are emerging from the water, which suggests that Rabbi Yohanan would be inside the women's ritual bath, rather than by its gates (*When* 248 n.28). This reading makes the narrative more radically transgressive.

¹²³ A medieval Jewish commentator Yom Tov ben Abraham (Ritva), bothered by Rabbi Yohanan's immodesty, reads this aggadah as an example of Rabbi Yohanan's ability to exercise sexual self-restraint. The talmudic text, however, does not support this reading: it does not mention Rabbi Yohanan's struggle with his sexual desire, in sharp contrast to multiple talmudic stories about other rabbis.

(Gen. 39.7-13). Unlike Joseph or the escapist rabbis, Rabbi Yohanan actively pursues sexual temptation and himself seduces married women.

The male gaze at female body would be a normative signifier of gender and power in ancient literatures (Goldhill 374–75). This tale, however, reverses the heteronormative sexual expectations of the reader, who is assumed by the text to be male. The focus of the narrative is the erotic appeal of Rabbi Yohanan, rather than that of the women in the *mikveh* whom he is going to meet. Rabbi Yohanan turns himself into the object of the female gaze and, by association, of the (male) reader's gaze. In a parallel talmudic text, another sage, Rav Giddel sits by the women's ritual bath: "Rav Giddel was accustomed to go and sit at the gates of the women's immersion sites. He said to them: Immerse yourselves in this way, and immerse yourselves in that way. The Sages said to him: Master, do you not fear the evil inclination? He said to them: In my eyes, they are comparable to white geese" (b.Berakhot 20a). In contrast to Rav Giddel, who presents *mikveh* as an asexual space and who is exclusively concerned with the legalities related to the performance of the prescribed ritual, Rabbi Yohanan centers his behaviour around the sexual meanings of the ritual bath, in an attempt to arouse the women's sexual desire, to indirectly participate in their sexual relations with their husbands, and to influence their reproduction. In spite of that, in contrast to the story of Rav Giddel in b.Berakhot 20a, the sages in b.Bava Metsia 84a are concerned exclusively with Rabbi Yohanan's beauty that can be harmed by "the evil eye," yet they express no concern about his sexual temptation, "the evil inclination." It is his beauty, erotically gazed upon by women, that is at the center of the narrative. In an inversion of the story of Rav Giddel looking at naked women, "Rabbi Yohanan appears as the visual object of these immersing women" (Neis, *When* 158). Neis suggests another possibility of a queer reading here: in light of the previous account of the effeminate looks of

Rabbi Yohanan, who lacks facial hair, this narrative may suggest women's desire for women or for nonbinary bodies (*When* 167).

The gaze is also homoerotic: it belongs to the male writers and redactors of this talmudic tale and to their intended male readers. The images of women preparing for sexual intercourse appear as a drag that allows the male rabbis to express their own sexual fantasies about each other. The supposedly male reader is invited to join the fictional female characters of this tale in the erotic interaction with a male sage, in admiration of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty—in an appropriation of female homosocial spaces where men do not belong. This androcentric narrative reveals the patriarchal mechanisms of the exclusion of women even in the most feminine spheres. It also makes the opposite move, shifting the focus from male sexual desire for women to female sexual desire for men, turning women into the subjects of the erotic gaze. In this story, rabbinic culture shows a mechanism of challenging its own heteronormativity. The male authors and readers of this narrative identify with women. They allow themselves to contemplate the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan, to desire him, to imagine sexual intercourse with him, and to want to conceive children from him, the children who would resemble him.

Another way of reading this story as queer is through the theme of third parties that “intrude on dyadic cisheterosexual reproduction via the eyes” (Neis, *When* 156). The narrative emphasizes the importance of the erotic experience, to the extent of inviting a third person in a marital relationship. Rabbi Yohanan wants women to fantasize about his beauty during their intercourse with their husbands. Not only does Rabbi Yohanan seduce married women, causing them to commit an imaginative adultery, but he also becomes a participant in a sexual relationship of the married couple, creating a form of sexual threesome, *ménage à trois*. This tale suggests that the women's husbands are not as attractive (or learned) as Rabbi Yohanan, hence

Rabbi Yohanan's beauty can enhance the sexual life of these married couples. In his turn, Rabbi Yohanan fantasizes about sex with these women, yet he also, through these women, fantasizes about sex with their husbands.

The story of Rabbi Yohanan's custom of sitting at the entrance to the women's ritual bath echoes the Greco-Roman conventions of homoerotic intellectualism, which go back to Plato and Athenian pederasty (see also my discussion later).¹²⁴ Jewish women are said to contemplate Rabbi Yohanan's beauty as a way of procreation that produces beauty and wisdom, "beautiful and learned sons" like Rabbi Yohanan, which is similar to Plato's idea of pederasty as erotic, intellectual, and spiritual procreation in the myth of Diotima (*Symposium* 209b8).¹²⁵ Similar to Plato, the rabbis assign the feminine quality of procreation to a male, Rabbi Yohanan, whose beauty (not his knowledge of the Torah!) is supposed to engender more male beauty ("beautiful sons like me") and more wisdom ("sons learned in Torah like me"). A version of this story

¹²⁴ The story of Jeremiah in the bathhouse in *Ben Sira's Alphabet*, a collection of Jewish folklore composed around the ninth century CE, echoes the talmudic story of Rabbi Yohanan at the gates of the women's *mikveh* and its notion of male beauty reproducing itself. Both tales are androcentric and patriarchal: women perform an instrumental function there, as a medium in relationships between men. Both stories also disrupt the heteronormative structures of traditional Jewish society by showing homoerotic desire and same-sex practices as procreative and as participating in the continuity of Jewish scholarship. The birth of Ben Sira, to whom the book is attributed, occurs through a miracle, without intercourse (as some other saintly figures), as a result of male-male erotic gaze and sexual activities between males. When Jeremiah, a biblical prophet, attends a ritual bath, he encounters a group of men "from the tribe of Ephraim" mutually masturbating there. These men force Jeremiah to join them. As a result, Jeremiah ejaculates in the water. When later his daughter immerses herself in the same *mikveh*, she conceives and gives birth to Ben Sira, who becomes an outstanding Torah scholar and mystic. Biale points to the subversive ambiguity of this tale, which "turns a scandal into a virtue" (83–84), a transgressive behavior into a praised outcome. It at once condemns and affirms male same-sex sexual practices. To take a step further, one can see how the homosocial space of the men's *mikveh* becomes a male homoerotic space that is procreative both physically and intellectually. Through engaging in sexual activities with men Jeremiah produces a son and a great Torah scholar. Cf. a Persian Pahlavi narrative, composed around the same time as *Ben Sira's Alphabet*, about the seed of Zoroaster that is stored in a lake, impregnates virgins who bath in the lake, and in this way produces Zoroastrian savior figures, Saošyant (*Bundahišn* 33.43–45; see Neis, *When* 158).

¹²⁵ Compare the critique of the "handsome and learned" formula in the stories of Rabbi Yehoshua and the Roman emperor/emperor's daughter (b. Taanit 7a-b and b. Nedarim 50b). Apparently, these alternative rabbinic traditions represent a polemic against the Greco-Roman association between beauty and knowledge acquisition. In contrast to the story of Rabbi Yohanan in b. Bava Metsia 84a, these traditions attribute the phrase "handsome and learned" to the Roman opponents of the rabbis. In response, Rabbi Yehoshua, "the ugly sage," claims that physical beauty is in fact an obstacle for acquiring knowledge.

elsewhere in the Talmud only mentions “beautiful” children, omitting the “learned” part: “Rabbi Yohanan was accustomed to go and sit at the gates of the women’s immersion sites. He said: When the daughters of Israel emerge from their immersion, they will look at me, and will have children [lit. “seed”] as beautiful as I” (b.Berakhot 20a). This tradition understands the reproduction of a sage’s physical appearance as the sole purpose of this endeavour. In b.Bava Metsia 84a, however, the reproduction of physical beauty is linked to reproduction of knowledge. As in Plato’s philosophy, this male procreation is erotic yet not necessarily sexual: it involves contemplation of beauty rather than sexual acts. The progeneration of the beautiful (identical to the good in Plato’s thought) is linked to the intellect and knowledge (“beautiful sons like me, learned in the Torah like me”), which corresponds to Greek philosophical ideals. The rabbis construct their ideal masculinity, “beautiful and learned,” as similar to Plato’s Form of Beauty as a reflection of the divinity. Intellectual perfection, which manifests in the studying of the Torah, is the ultimate goal of beauty. The knowledge is passed through the beautiful: in order to have “learned sons,” the women are expected to look at the beautiful scholar, not to learn Torah from him. In contrast to Plato’s thought, rooted in the context of Athenian pederasty, in the rabbinic tale the spectators are female, and the procreation is both spiritual (through the women’s erotic interaction with Rabbi Yohanan) and physical (through the women’s sexual intercourse with their husbands). Rabbi Yohanan reproduces his own beauty and knowledge through the wives of other Jewish men and their sons. In this case, the erotic contemplation produces Jewish scholarship and rabbinic beauty, which serves as a response to the Roman matron’s question about the rabbis’ (and by extension, rabbinic culture’s) ability to reproduce. The rabbis’ response, affirming the viability of rabbinic Judaism, is framed within Greco-Roman

cultural norms, through Plato's concept of intellectual procreation by way of erotic contemplation.

3.5 Rabbi Yohanan's Beauty and Resh Lakish's Strength: Homoeroticism of Rabbinic Study Partnership in Its Cultural Contexts

This section outlines a homoerotic reading of the final story of the Rabbi Yohanan Cycle in b.Bava Metsia 84a, a story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish. It suggests that the rabbinic construction of homoerotic study partnership in this narrative echoes the legend of David and Jonathan in the Hebrew Bible and the Athenian institution of pederasty in Plato's interpretation. It also suggests that the homoerotic or gay reading of this story became conventional in Jewish LGBTQ culture in the new millennium.

The tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish is generally viewed as a story of the paradigmatic study pair. The relationship of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish is an example of the ideal *havruta* in Jewish interpretive tradition (such as Maharsha and Mordechai Yosef Leiner) and in today's critical scholarship (Block 142; Blumenthal 15; Rubenstein, *Culture* 51; Kent, "Interactive" 25; Holzer, "Either"). The Talmud depicts Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as initially a mentor and a student and later as study partners (b.Bava Metsia 84a). Together, they teach, interpret religious laws, establish new rulings, and engage in scholarly discussions. Both traditional and contemporary commentators read the story of Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's relationship in b.Bava Metsia 84a as a discourse on ethics and scholarship, on the nature of relationship between two people in learning dialogue, and on the study partner's role (Holzer, "Either" 131).

Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's relationship is also erotic and romantic. It begins with an encounter in the Jordan river, with Resh Lakish's erotic gaze at the nude body of Rabbi Yohanan¹²⁶ who is bathing in the river¹²⁷ followed by Resh Lakish's undressing and sexual pursuit of the object of his desire, Rabbi Yohanan. Rabbi Yohanan, in his turn, admires Resh Lakish's virility and physical strength. While turning the sexual encounter into an intellectual one and replacing sex with Torah study, Rabbi Yohanan still acknowledges the erotic character of this encounter. Furthermore, Rabbi Yohanan offers a quasi-marital relationship to Resh Lakish, a relationship that produces strong emotional bonds. The story of Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's meeting continues the preceding talmudic discussions of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty, the rabbis' bodies, their sexual organs, sexual relations, and reproduction. Scholars also point to the sexual symbolism of the episode of Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's first meeting. Kosman mentions the talmudic opposition between the phallic symbolism of Resh Lakish's spear and the intimacy of rabbinic study partnership that Rabbi Yohanan offers instead ("R. Johanan" 132). Neis reads the image of Resh Lakish's thrusting spear as a metaphor for an actual, likely forced, sexual intercourse between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan (*When* 164). Neis's interpretation is based on a manuscript version that reads: "he [Resh Lakish] thrust his spear in the Jordan and leapt behind him [Rabbi Yohanan]" (Neis, *When* 250 n.57-58). Neis supports this reading with a variant text of Rabbi Yohanan's comment on Resh Lakish's body "your strength is of an ox (*tura*)," which stands in place of "your strength is for the Torah" present in the other manuscripts (*When* 165). Neis points to the popular in the Ancient Near East image of the ox as

¹²⁶ Some manuscripts add that Resh Lakish "thought that [Rabbi Yohanan] was a woman," which suggests a feminine image of Rabbi Yohanan's body and a heteronormative character of Resh Lakish's desire. Accordingly, Neis translates Resh Lakish's words addressed to Rabbi Yohanan as "your beauty is of women" (as opposed to a more common translation "your beauty is for women").

¹²⁷ Cf. a parallel rabbinic tradition: "Resh Lakish was swimming in the Jordan River when Rabba bar bar Hana came and gave him a hand" (b.Yoma 9b). In this text, it is Resh Lakish who is seen nude in the Jordan River by another rabbi. As is in Bava Metsia, an encounter in the river serves as a setting for a confrontation between rabbis.

representing virility, animal sexuality, and violence (*When* 165). The sexual character of the scene in the Jordan river can additionally be supported by Rabbi Yohanan's apparent allusion to a biblical verse "Do not give your strength to women" (Prov. 31.3), which is based on a popular in antiquity belief that ejaculation during sexual intercourse weakens the man's body. Neis also reads the condition of Rabbi Yohanan's proposal to Resh Lakish ("if you return") in the literal meaning as "retraction," withdrawal of Resh Lakish's penis, as opposed to the common interpretation of Resh Lakish's "return" as repentance, "return" to God and the Torah (*When* 166).

This legend presents the rabbinic Study Hall, Beit Midrash, as a place of intimate study partnership and eroticized relationships between scholars, meditating on the themes of authority and violence (Boyarin, "Why" 54; Kosman *passim*). It is possible that the ancient rabbis viewed the Study Hall as a desexualized space, which therefore became a sanctioned space for intense homoeroticism, a male-male spiritual bonding over seeking wisdom (Boyarin, "Why" 67). As my previous discussion shows, however, the literary context of this tale in b.Bava Metsia 84a frames the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in the larger discussion of sexual desire, marital relations, and male beauty. This section demonstrates parallels between this rabbinic image of study partnership and Mesopotamian, ancient Israelite, and Greco-Roman concepts of eros, friendship, and intellectual pursuits. Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's study partnership echoes the homoerotic images of the ancient heroic couples (see Boyarin; Putterman). Apparently, the ancient rabbis also presented the relationship between two sages in conventional Greco-Roman terms, as in some ways analogous to, and critical of, pederasty (Boyarin, *Unheroic*; Sienna; S. Greenberg). In recent decades, reading the story of Rabbi Yohanan and

Resh Lakish as homoerotic or queer, or as an example of gay relationship has become widespread in Jewish scholarship, fiction, and popular culture.

3.5.1 Heroic Couples: From Biblical Warriors to Rabbinic Scholars

The biblical imagery of heroic pairs of warriors such as David and Jonathan, similar to the traditions of homoerotic homosociality popular in the Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman literatures, might have influenced the rabbinic idea of homosocial intimacy between the sages. Although the homoerotic or queer reading of the David and Jonathan legend in Jewish culture is a very recent phenomenon,¹²⁸ I suggest that talmudic rewriting of the biblical story of David and Jonathan reinvented as Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish introduced the motif of David and Jonathan as intimate study partners in Jewish culture. The reworkings of the biblical legend in rabbinic literature employ some homoerotic elements of the biblical text in support of their own ideal of Torah study.

As I discuss in Chapter Two, critical approaches that attempt to look at the biblical texts on their own terms have adopted the “homosocial interpretation” (Heacock), a reading of the narratives of David and Jonathan in Samuel as a portrayal of homosocial bonds between males in a heroic couple in the military and political context. These works look at the biblical depiction of the “homosocial bonding in gender segregated society” (Nissinen 24), which is similar to other ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean literatures such as the Gilgamesh Epic¹²⁹ or the Iliad (Halperin, “Heroes”; Nissinen; Jennings; Ackerman; Heacock). Depiction of such homosocial relationships in the ancient epics typically included homoerotic imagery, which highlighted intimate emotional attachments between warriors. As other ancient legends of military

¹²⁸ See Chapter Two of this dissertation.

¹²⁹ On the possible influence of Gilgamesh Epic on the David and Jonathan narrative, including its homoerotic features, see also Damrosch; Römer and Bonjour 80-102; Schroer and Staubli 22; Halperin; Nissinen; Harding.

comradeship and couples of warriors, the biblical legend emphasizes the military virtues of male lovers, their devotion and loyalty to one another, their courage and heroism. Halperin compares homoerotic elements in three narratives about heroic friendship: Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*, Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and David and Jonathan in the *Book of Samuel*. He describes a “common set of structures which serve to organize the basic elements that constitute each friendship” including the dyadic and hierarchical character of these relationships, their structural asymmetry and their outward purpose, “glorious deeds or political ends” (“Heroes” 78). Halperin emphasizes that the literary pattern of “heroes and their pals” is not an example of universal, neutral category of friendship, but it is “a specific cultural formation, a type of heroic friendship which is better captured by terms like comrades-in-arms, boon companions, and the like” (“Heroes” 77). Jennings identifies this conventional relationship of a hero (a king or a prince) and his younger armour-bearer as the “heroic model” of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible (2–4, 3–76).¹³⁰ Scholars note that this literary pattern of male heroic couples is not analogical to the classical Greek context of Athenian pederasty¹³¹ and that this pattern belongs to an earlier cultural tradition evident in the oldest Near Eastern texts or in the military societies of Sparta and Thebes (Halperin, “Heroes” 87; Nissinen 56; Jennings 11; Harding 186). For instance, Plato claimed that Sparta’s idea of heroism was associated with love relationships between men: “only lovers can die for one another” (*Symposium* 179A-B).

Scholars of rabbinics point to the analogy between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in the rabbinic tale and the images of Achilles and Patroclus in Homer’s *Iliad* and David and Jonathan

¹³⁰ The biblical text refers to David as Saul’s armour-bearer (1 Sam. 16.14-23). Jennings’s assertion that David was also Jonathan’s armour-bearer, although possible, is not supported with textual evidence.

¹³¹ See, however, Jennings’s reading of the David and Jonathan story as a distinct Israelite version of a pederastic relationship, where a younger male is courted by a man of a higher social status (211–13), with some parallels to the Greek myth of Zeus and Ganymede, where a male hero is chosen by a male deity because of the former’s beauty (68–69).

in the Hebrew Bible. Boyarin suggests that the rabbinic pair is a Jewish answer to the archetypal pairs of Homer or of the Bible, noting the likelihood that the Homeric imagery would have been available in the rabbinic sociolect and that the hero and pal model was still popular in the Hellenistic period (*Unheroic* 135). Boyarin reads the tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish narrative in b.Bava Metsia 84a “as being constructed within the Mediterranean paradigm of heroes and their pals”: “Within this text of rabbinic self-fashioning over-against their fantasies of Roman culture—explicitly signified by the ‘ethnically’ Jewish but culturally ‘Roman’ gladiator, Resh Lakish—the valor of war-making is replaced by the valor of Torah study, metaphorically realized as a sort of battle” (*Unheroic* 135). Alternatively, Putterman reads b.Bava Metsia 84a in light of the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. Putterman’s work suggests that the Mesopotamian literature, rather than the Greco-Roman traditions, would be a possible cultural influence on the Babylonian rabbis. Putterman analyzes several parallels between the story of Enkidu at the start of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the encounter of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in the river in the talmudic story. Similar to the civilizing function of eros with a prostitute in the Gilgamesh Epic, in the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish “the eroticism of the river encounter is not a sign of the brigand Reish Laqish’s depravity, but the very catalyst in Reish Laqish’s transformation,” with (homo)erotic experience leading to the attainment of knowledge and wisdom associated with Torah study (Putterman).

Building upon Boyarin’s suggestion which draws a parallel between the rabbinic representation of male couples, “rabbis and their pals” (*Unheroic* Chapter Three), and the literary pattern of heroic male couples in the ancient Mediterranean, I argue that the closest and most plausible literary connection is between the talmudic tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish and the biblical legend of David and Jonathan. This biblical subtext for the talmudic narrative places

the latter in the larger literary framework of legends of male heroic dyads that both biblical and rabbinic cultures share with surrounding cultures including ancient Mesopotamia and Greece, which explains the parallels with the Gilgamesh Epic or with the Iliad. Accordingly, I read the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a as rabbinic reworkings of the biblical story of David and Jonathan in 1-2 Samuel. The rabbis replace the settings of the military elite of ancient Israel with their own context of the intellectual elite of rabbinic academies. The homosocial homoeroticism of warriors translates into a similar homosocial homoeroticism of Torah scholarship. The rabbinic male couple of scholars and study partners thus becomes heirs to the biblical couples of heroes, claiming their glory, their royal status, and their power over Israel.

I suggest that the ancient rabbis retained and reworked the biblical affective, erotic-romantic discourse of male-male relationships in their dictums on love and friendship in Avot, in the discussions of male beauty in b.Bava Metsia 84a, and in the narratives about Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in the same source. I propose that rabbinic literature views the narratives about David and Jonathan in 1 Sam.18-2 Sam.1.26, which include homoerotic imagery, as archetypal for relationships between male scholars. A Tannaitic source in m.Avot 5.16 constructs an ideal relationship between scholars by juxtaposing a male-male romantic relationship (David and Jonathan) and sexual violence perpetrated by a man toward a woman (Amnon and Tamar). This juxtaposition suggests that, in minds of the ancient rabbis, one can be understood in light of the other, as examples of positive (David and Jonathan) and negative (Amnon and Tamar) extremes of human interactions.

Furthermore, an Amoraic source in b.Bava Metsia 84a imagines an ideal relationship between scholars through reworkings of some elements of the story of David and Jonathan in the tale of

Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, where the images of talmudic scholars replace the images of biblical military heroes. I suggest that a homoerotic link between warriors and scholars is evident in the similarities between the biblical story of David and Jonathan and the rabbinic story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish.¹³²

Scholars in rabbinics point to the tendency of the ancient rabbis, in midrashic collections and in the aggadic midrashim (tannaitic and amoraic) quoted in the Talmud, as well as in the amoraic discussions in the Talmud, to anachronistically refashion biblical heroes in their own image, to depict biblical figures as rabbis (Neusner, *Invitation* 8; Rubenstein, *Culture* 1–3, 28; Diamond 377, 390, 406–07; Kalmin, *Sage* 51; Kalmin, *Babylonia* 37). Diamond points to a number of biblical personalities that, in rabbinic interpretation, “become founders and active participants in the rabbinic enterprise of Torah academics” (377, 406 n.16), such as Jacob and Esau (Gen. Rabbah 63.10), Jacob and Joseph (Gen. Rabbah 94.3), all the patriarchs (b.Yoma 28b), Moses and Korach (Num. Rabbah 18.3 and y.Sanhedrin 10.27), or Saul, Abner, Samuel, and Do’eg (Ruth Rabbah 4.6 and b.Yevamot 76b-77a). The Babylonian rabbis transformed biblical kings or priests into rabbis by portraying them as studying the Torah (Kalmin, *Babylonia* 37). This strategy of rabbinization functions to project rabbinic values, the highest of which was Torah study, onto the biblical characters (Diamond 377). One can also suggest that it served to present the rabbis as legitimate successors of the Israelite kings and heroes, as the heirs to their glory and

¹³² Another source that suggests a link between heroes and scholars, made by eroticizing the warriors and then applying this image to scholars, is a midrash quoted in b.Hagigah 14a that discusses what the ancient rabbis understood to be the images of God in the Hebrew Bible. The rabbis interpret a verse in Daniel, “the hair of his head like pure white wool” (Dan. 7.9), to be an image of God as an older Torah scholar in the Heavenly Yeshiva. They also read a verse in the Song of Songs, “His locks are curled, black as a raven” (Song of Sg. 5.11), to be an image of God as a young warrior. In the original context of the Song of Songs this verse is part of the erotic depiction of the male character by his female lover, which the rabbis interpret allegorically as referring to an intimate relationship between the male God and the male Israel. The talmudic juxtaposition of these two images, God as a Torah scholar in the yeshiva and God as a hero-lover, suggests an attempt to glorify and eroticize Jewish scholars. The rabbis project the image of the lovemaking military hero upon the image of the scholar to make a connection between the biblical warriors and the rabbinic scholars, with the eroticism, present in both images, at the core of this connection.

power. The tendency to rabbinize biblical characters manifests itself, among others, in “a midrashic tradition of King David’s academy” (Rubenstein, *Culture* 77) and in recurrent representations of the figure of David as a Torah scholar.¹³³ Kalmin argues that both Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis saw David as a paradigmatic rabbi; hence, their representation of David reflected their self-image and their relations with non-rabbinic Jews (*Sage* 83, 88). Kalmin also discusses rabbinic images of David as references to the patriarch in Israel (*nasi*) and the exilarch in Babylonia (*rosh ha-golah*), both of whom claimed a Davidic descent, e.g., in b.Shabbat 56a (*Sage* 88–90). The ancient rabbis’ self-identification with David could express their claims to national leadership, which was traditionally associated with the Davidic royal dynasty.¹³⁴ A number of traditions portray David as a rabbi, a Torah scholar (e.g., midrashim in Ruth Rabba 4:3 and Babylonian amoraic discussions in b.Sanhedrin 49a, 93b, and 107a; b.Makkot 10a; b.Mo’ed Katan 16b; b.Berakhot 4a; b.Megillah 14a; see also Kalmin; Rubenstein; Diamond). These traditions reinterpret the biblical image of David the king (or king to be) as a rabbi with expertise in Scripture, Mishnah, and Talmud who is skilled in rabbinic dialectic and knowledgeable in halakhah (Ruth Rabba 4:3), a halakhic authority who makes decisions about ritual purity (b.Berakhot 4a) or engages in scholarly debates (b.Megillah 14a and elsewhere). David’s strengths as a warrior are reinterpreted as excellence in studying Torah and teaching in the rabbinic academy (b.Mo’ed Katan 16b). These traditions translate David’s physical beauty into intellectual abilities (“attractive reasons for his halakhic opinions”) and his military skills into the skills of studying and teaching Torah (“in the war of Torah”), in particular, into dialectics of an intellectual debate between study partners or teachers and students. Rubenstein

¹³³ Diamond notes that the “view of David as a rabbinic model” persisted in the medieval period (see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Their Wars*, 11.4) and in the modern period, for instance, in the debates on the exemption of yeshiva students from military service in modern Israel (377, 407 n.18).

¹³⁴ Cf. a similar move in the New Testament’s attempt to represent Jesus as a descendant of David (Matt. 1.1–17).

locates these aggadot in the larger context of the rabbinic “combative terminology” that translates biblical imagery of battle into discussions of Torah, e.g., in b.Berakhot 3b-4a; b.Sanhedrin 42a; 107a; b.Megilah 15b; b.Kiddushin 30b (*Culture* 59–61). Some of these aggadot attribute similar qualities of a scholar to Jonathan (“Jonathan is like him,” b.Sanhedrin 93b). Diamond notes that these talmudic narratives consistently draw parallels between David’s mythical Torah study and his erotic fantasies (380–92). For instance, some aggadot portray David using halakhic discussion of women’s ritual purity to pursue his sexual desires with Abigail and Bathsheba (b.Berakhot 4a; b.Megillah 14a). In some rabbinic traditions, both war and Torah study are analogical to sexual activities. Some others contrast the sexual imagery of war against the supposedly asexual space of the study house. For example, the rabbinic traditions in b.Mo’ed Katan 16b, through “the erotically suggestive metaphors that run consistently through this entire aggadic passage” (Diamond 392), contrasts what seems to be approved homoeroticism of war (“when David goes out to battle, he makes himself hard as a tree” to subdue the enemy, and “he would shoot an arrow and fell eight hundred”) against, on the one hand, the perceived asexual character of Torah study (“when David is engaged in studying Torah, he makes himself soft as a worm”) and, on the other hand, the disapproved illicit heteroerotic relationships (David’s affair with Bathsheba as an instance of a misguided “arrow”).¹³⁵

I suggest that this strategy of rabbinizing biblical heroes, including David, could be found already in the Mishnah, in its use of the biblical images such as Amnon and Tamar, David and Jonathan, or Moses and Korah, to convey ideas about relationships between scholars. A tradition in the mishnaic tractate Avot contrasts the coercive sexual intercourse between Tamar and Amnon, depicted in 2 Sam. 13.1-15, against the romantic commitment between David and

¹³⁵ Cf. the images of bow and arrow in the David and Jonathan legend (1 Sam. 18.4; 20.1-23; 20.36; 2 Sam. 1.22).

Jonathan: “Every [instance of] love that depends on something, [when] the thing ceases, the love [also] ceases. But [love] that is not dependent on anything never ceases. What is a love that is dependent on something? This is the love of Amnon and Tamar. And one that is not dependent on anything? This is the love of David and Jonathan” (m.Avot 5.16).

The Tannaim’s choice of the story of the rape of Tamar by Amnon and the language of “love”¹³⁶ referring to rape are odd and highly problematic from the modern perspective, yet it is indicative of the cultural assumptions characteristic of Jewish antiquity (shared with the surrounding cultures). According to these assumptions, whether the text emphasized the aspect of violence or not, a sexual act would always be coercive, and sexual desire (“love”) would always refer to the desire of the penetrative subject, without expectations of mutuality. The hierarchical definition of sex as the subject-object interaction that was prevalent in the ancient Mediterranean did not take the desires and consent of the object into account (see my discussion of the phallogentric discourse in Chapter Two, section 2.3.1 and the footnote 36). The Tannaim draw on the biblical language of “love” in this story (“and Amnon son of David became infatuated with her” [lit. “loved her” or “fell in love with her”] in 2 Sam. 13.1; “I am in love with Tamar” in 2 Sam. 13.4). Obviously, the meaning of *‘ahavah* in both 2 Samuel and Avot is “lust,” not “love.” The focus of the rabbis is, indeed, the coercive sexual act depicted in this story, and the biblical description how sexual gratification turned into hatred: “Then Amnon felt a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing [*sin’ah*] for her was greater than the passion [*‘ahavah*] he had felt for her” (2 Sam. 13.15).¹³⁷ The Tannaim downplay the fact of rape here and in this way whitewash the Amnon and Tamar episode, even though they incorporate this story as an

¹³⁶ See Appendix A for the semantic range of *‘h.v.* (“love”) in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature.

¹³⁷ Cf. the equally disturbing story of rape of Dinah in Gen. 34.2-3, in which, in contrast to 2 Sam. 13, Shechem “falls in love” with Dinah after the coercive intercourse with her.

example of the negative aspect of lust which is dependent on ulterior motives and fleeting. The Mishna's use of the term '*ahavah* ("love") in a sexual context here by equating desire with violence is disturbing and shows the limits of this rabbinic discourse (as well as the biblical text that it refers to). The Tannaim's choice of the biblical passage is, however, consistent with their understanding of the differences between the phallocentric and the affective discourses, the former representing sexual interactions (perceived as often non-consensual and violent) and the latter representing nonsexual intimacies (perceived as mutual and virtuous).

This saying shows the polarization of the phallocentric and affective discourses characteristic of biblical and rabbinic cultures by drawing a distinction between what it names two types of "love" ('*ahavah*), "love dependent on something," represented by "the love of Amnon and Tamar" in 2 Sam. 13.1-15, and "love not dependent on anything," represented by "the love of David and Jonathan" in 1-2 Sam. In this rabbinic statement, Amnon and Tamar, on the one hand, and David and Jonathan, on the other, represent two ends of a continuum. One end is represented by an instance of incestuous rape, when lust, once consumed, transforms into hatred. The other end is represented by an erotic and romantic relationship presumed to be nonsexual, a relationship that is committed and enduring. This scheme suggests a binary between sexual desire and romantic love as it was understood by the ancient rabbis. The Tannaim compare male-female relationships (Amnon and Tamar) with male-male relationships (David and Jonathan) without making a distinction between cross-sex and same-sex interactions. Rather, they differentiate between the sexual (associated with lust and coercion) and the affective (associated with mutual commitment out of free will). The love of David and Jonathan, moreover, evoked for the rabbis their own passionate relationships devoid of conscious sexuality within the homosocial settings of the Study Hall.

The context of Avot, a tractate that generally discusses ethical aspects of Torah study and the ideal code of conduct for scholars, suggests that like other statements in Avot, this discussion refers to relationships between scholars (teachers and students, colleagues, and study partners). The immediate context of the saying in Avot 5.16 supports this assumption. The mishnayot that precede Avot 5.16 describe types (*midot*) of scholars and their learning styles, the four types of “those who frequent the study house” (m.Avot 5.14) and the four types of “those who sit before sages” (m.Avot 5.15). The mishnah that follows Avot 5.16 discusses two types of disagreements among scholars: “Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will endure. But one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. Which is the dispute that is for the sake of Heaven? It is the dispute of Hillel and Shammai. And which is the dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven? This is the dispute of Korah and all his congregation” (m.Avot 5.17). The structure of this mishnah parallels the previous one. Avot 5.16 meditates upon love among scholars (as opposed to hatred associated with sexual violence). Avot 5.17 meditates upon hatred among scholars.

In Avot 5.16, the Tannaim imagine a study pair as the reinvented David and Jonathan. They discuss the intimacy of Torah study as analogous to the bond between the biblical heroes. This rabbinic statement could be understood as affirmation of the homoerotic context (a claim that sexual love with men is better than sexual activity with women, in this case associated with rape and incest¹³⁸) or as negation of any erotic component (a claim that non-sexual love between men is better than sexual contact between men and women, which, according to this example, can be driven by lust and can take a form of violence).¹³⁹ Avot juxtaposes lust and coercive sexual

¹³⁸ The biblical narrator disregards the incestuous character of this story by having Tamar offer Amnon to marry her and assuming that David would agree to this arrangement: “Please, speak to the king; he will not refuse me to you” (2 Sam. 13.13).

¹³⁹ Adler reads this rabbinic exegesis in Avot as contradistinction between “love dependent on sexual desire and love not dependent on sexual desire,” understanding the relationship between David and Jonathan, being a model for *havruta*, as nonsexual (“Virgin” 32). In contrast, Boyarin proposes to read the mishnaic exegesis as a variation of

intercourse between a man and a woman (Amnon and Tamar), as “the love that passes,” on the one hand, and the romantic relationship between two men (David and Jonathan), as “the love that endures,” on the other. I find some parallels between this tradition in Avot and three other texts, David’s Lament and the Levitical law in the Hebrew Bible and the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in the Talmud.

“[T]he love of David and Jonathan” in Avot 5.16 refers to David’s Lament in the Book of Samuel, which contrasts Jonathan’s love for David with the “love of women,” deeming the relationship of David and Jonathan “more wonderful than the love of women”: “I grieve for you, My brother Jonathan, You were most dear to me. Your love was wonderful to me More than the love of women” (2 Sam. 1.26). Of course, rape (depicted in the Tamar and Amnon story and referenced in Avot as an opposite to “the love of David and Jonathan”) is not “love of women,” and violence should not be extrapolated to love of men either. Here is where modern sensibilities differ from the ancient ones.¹⁴⁰ I would argue that in the biblical and rabbinic examples discussed here, the term “love” does not refer to romantic feelings (the modern meaning of “love”) but it is a technical term used in a specific context to refer to sexual relations (“love of women”), which were typically coercive, or to commitment/loyalty (“love of heroes” such as David and

Aristotle’s idea of three types of friendship. According to this reading, this statement in Avot refers to an opposition of two kinds of erotic love: love with an ulterior motive or a particular need, such as lust actualized in Amnon’s rape of Tamar, and the disinterested love focused on the partner, such as Jonathan’s altruistic commitment to David (*Carnal* 187).

¹⁴⁰ Most of biblical texts that reference “love” or desire emphasize male desire and portray women as silent objects of this desire or love (few exceptions include Michal’s love for David in 1 Sam. 18.20 and the feelings of the female lover in the Song of Songs). For instance, the episode of David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 11.2-4 essentially describes the rape of Bathsheba by David, although it is not perceived as violence by the biblical writers and redactors. Rabbinic literature exhibits similar attitudes, for example, by endorsing marital rape in b.Nedarim 20b (see, however, the prohibition of marital rape in b.Eruvin 100b). In the patriarchal and sexist culture that quite literally equated marriage with slavery, without differentiating between marrying a daughter to a man and selling her to him as a sex slave (Ex. 21.7-10; b.Ketubot 47b-48a), the woman’s consent was rarely a consideration, let alone the norm. Confronting this disturbing cultural context is necessary in today’s discussions of the biblical and rabbinic sexual categories and their effects in modern Jewish culture.

Jonathan). Within the cultural context of Ancient Israel, “the love of women” (*‘ahavat nashim*) in David’s Lament in 2 Samuel parallels the biblical terminology of the “lyings of woman” (*mishkevei ‘ishah*) in Leviticus, which most likely refers to male-male rape.¹⁴¹ The Levitical law regards sexual acts between men as essentially (or, rather, performatively) analogous to the ones between men and women, which the biblical authors assume to be primarily sexual. The narrative in 2 Samuel, which apparently shares this conceptualization, contrasts male-female relations (“love of women”) with the love between men (Jonathan’s love for David). The fact that this analogy is possible suggests that, in the mind of the biblical writer, relations between men can be conceptually isomorphic to relations between men and women. Both biblical expressions, although using the image of “women,” occur in the context of relationships between men. The prohibition of sex between males in Leviticus uses the feminine image to describe sexual penetration of a male by another male: “You shall not lie with a male [by] lyings of woman...” (Lev. 18.22; my translation); “If a man lies with a male [by] lyings of woman....” (Lev. 20.13; my translation). David’s lament after Jonathan, too, uses the imagery of feminine sexuality to describe his relationship with Jonathan: “Your love was wonderful to me more than

¹⁴¹ The ban on sexual intercourse between males in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 correlates with the references to male-male sex in biblical narratives which appear exclusively in the context of violence, such as the Sodom story in Gen. 19 and the story of a Levite and his concubine in Judg. 19, both of which depict attempted rape of males along with rape of women (attempted or actual) as analogous acts. See also the biblical stories of Noah’s rape by his son (Gen. 9.20-25), the Philistine gods and men raped by God of Israel (1 Sam. 5), David’s courtiers raped by Hanun, king of Ammonites (2 Sam. 10.1-5), Samson raped in the Philistine captivity (Judg. 16.21, 25), etc. The rabbinic narratives of male-male rape include midrashim on Israel’s relation to God (Song of Sg. Rabbah 1.2; 2.6; 4.7; 22.6, 1; 85.1; Gen. Rabbah 94.1; Lev. Rabbah 31.4) or to the foreign powers such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, or Rome (see b.Sotah 13b; Gen. Rabbah 86.3; Gen. Rabbah 63.10; Tanhuma Parashat Vaera 8; Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael Beshelah; Yalkut Shimoni 249; y.Kiddushin 1.7, 6a; Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Amalek 1; y.Kiddushin 1.7, 6a; b.Shabbat 149b; Song of Sg. Rabbah 9.2). Understanding of the Levitical laws as referring to cases of violence, in light of the rape narratives, has been present in critical scholarship (Boswell; Bradley Artson; Milgrom 1566; Jennings 207; Walsh, 208-209; Nissinen 25-72; Sarna, *Etz* 691). Sarna points out that, aside from the Levitical verses, the Hebrew Bible mentions homosexuality only in the context of rape (691). Nissinen surveys Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman examples of the broader cultural perception of male-male sex as necessarily coercive, as a sign of domination and violence (25-72). See also a meaning of *sh.kh.v*, “lie with,” used in Leviticus, as “being raped,” cf. *nishkevah/shukvah*, “she was raped” (Shlomo Karni, *Dictionary of Basic Biblical Hebrew*, Jerusalem: Carta, 2002, p. 151).

the love of women” (2 Sam. 1.26). Both texts use the term “woman” (*ishah*) when referring to love or sex between men. The difference, however, is in the nouns that the term “woman” qualifies. In Leviticus, “woman” qualifies the act of sexual penetration (“lying with,” *mishkav*) between males as analogical to sexual acts between men and women. Most likely, the verses in the Priestly source of Leviticus point to the authors’ anxiety about inversion of gender roles and a symbolic feminization of men, as an improper power relation. In 2 Samuel, the term “women” serves to depict the commitment (“love”) between men, as opposed to love between men and women or as similar to “love of women.”

The image of “two loves” in David’s Lament, which the Tannaim in Avot 5 adopt in such a disturbingly inadequate for a modern reader way, closely resembles Plato’s distinction between “the earthly love” and “the heavenly love,” *Urania*. According to Plato, the former, the physical love, is solely based on sexual acts with women or boys, whereas the latter, intellectual and spiritual love, involves feelings for beauty and, in the patriarchal homosocial context of the ancient Greece, is only possible between men (*Symposium* 187d-e, 208e-209a-c).¹⁴² Plato perceives the love between men and women as intended solely for pleasure and procreation and the love between men as participating in intellectual, emotional, and spiritual perfection, particularly in the context of Athenian pederasty. The Tannaim in Avot construct a similar opposition between the “earthly,” selfish desire (lust) of Amnon for Tamar, which takes form of violence and manifests itself as rape followed by hate, and the “heavenly” desire (commitment) of Jonathan for David, which translates into Jonathan’s consistent support of David and his selfless act of sacrificing his right to kingship in David’s favour.

¹⁴² Depending on the dating of 1 Samuel, one can speculate whether its authors could have been familiar with Plato’s ideas. It is also possible that David’s Lament is a later, Hellenistic addition to the earlier Deuteronomist source (this suggestion is my speculation that requires a separate research).

Alternatively, “the love of women” in David’s Lament can be understood in the context of other biblical references to cross-sex love, such as Isaac’s love for Rebecca (Gen. 24.67); Jacob’s love for Rachel (Gen. 29.18-30); Samson’s love for Delilah (Judges 16.4); Elkanah’s love for Hannah (1 Sam. 1.4); Solomon’s love of “many foreign women” (1 Kings 11.1-2); love of wife in Prov. 5.18-19; “happiness with a woman you love” in Eccl. 9.9; or Ahasuerus’s love for Esther (Esther 2.17). In all these examples, “love” has primary meanings of sexual desire and infatuation, often accompanied by affection and attachment and mostly associated with marriage. Most of these examples, however, refer to a man’s desire for a woman, without mentioning whether this desire (love) was mutual.¹⁴³ The only two instances of actual “love of women” in the Hebrew Bible, episodes that refer to a woman’s love for a man, are the verses that state Michal’s love for David in 1 Sam. 18.20 and the exchanges between the female and male lovers in the Song of Songs (the latter being the sole biblical text that depicts mutual love and desire). Michal’s love for David is, of course, the closest parallel to Jonathan’s love (the biblical text, however, never mentions David’s feelings for either Michal or Jonathan). Michal’s love and support of David serves a function in the storyline that is similar to Jonathan’s love, since both are children of Saul. David’s marriage to Michal allows him to enter the royal house. Just as Jonathan, Michal takes David’s side and saves him from Saul’s persecution. Nevertheless, the narrative focuses on David’s relationship with Jonathan, rather than with Michal, probably because Jonathan is the heir to the throne whom David is destined to replace. Perhaps, David compared Jonathan’s love and Michal’s love (as the “love of women”) in his Lament and thus drew an analogy between the two. There also might be a parallel between David’s Lament and the proclamation of Naomi’s friends in the Book of Ruth: “your daughter-in-law, who loves you

¹⁴³ Genesis 24 mentions Rebecca’s consent to marry Isaac before she met him, but it does not mention her feelings afterwards.

and is better to you than seven sons” (Ruth 4.15). The comparison of Ruth’s love for Naomi and the love of Naomi’s sons (with the former said to be better) seems like inversion of David’s Lament in the context of a relationship between two women. In this context, the love is non-sexual and refers to attachment and commitment between family members, bringing the notion of love entirely into the affective discourse (the sexual relationship between Ruth and Boaz serves as surrogacy in the relationship of Ruth and Naomi).

If the Hebrew Bible served as a starting point for the Tannaitic dicta in Avot, the latter apparently served, along with the Hebrew Bible, as a source for the Amoraic tale of the relationship between two scholars, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, in b.Bava Metsia 84a, a relationship that begins as a meditation on Avot 5.16 (Resh Lakish’s lust for Rabbi Yohanan results in the attempted rape but, in the context of Torah study, transforms into a genuine attachment) and ends as an illustration of Avot 5.17 (an intellectual debate between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish turns into a personal conflict). The contrast between Resh Lakish’s phallic sexuality and Rabbi Yohanan’s intimate study partnership points to the rabbinic distinction between the phallocentric and affective discourses. Some scholars read the episode in the Jordan River as a scene of the rape of Rabbi Yohanan by Resh Lakish (Kosman, “R. Yohanan” 131-132; Neis, *When* 164-166). The story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish constructs an opposition between sexual desire associated with male-female relationships (Rabbi Yohanan’s “beauty for women”) and intellectual pursuits associated with homosocial intimacy between men (Resh Lakish’s “strength for Torah”). This echoes the opposition of Amnon’s lust for Tamar and “the love of David and Jonathan” in Avot 5.16. It also parallels the two types of scholarly disputes in Avot 5.17 (“dispute that is for the sake of Heaven” and “one that is not for the sake of Heaven”). The Amoraim in Bava Metsia employ a line of thinking similar to that of

the Tannaim in Avot: they represent a study pair of scholars, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, as analogical to the biblical heroic couple, David and Jonathan.

As my discussion above demonstrates, the theme of rape is fundamental for rabbinic understanding of the phallogocentric discourse in contradistinction to the affective discourse of Torah study. The rape of Rabbi Yohanan by Resh Lakish (actual or attempted) corresponds to the rape of Tamar by Amnon and to the Levitical prohibition of male-male rape. All of these are presented, in a xenophobic manner typical for the ancient world, as foreign to Israelite/Jewish society: Tamar warns Amnon that “such things are not done in Israel!” (2 Sam. 13.12); Leviticus associates the prohibited practices with the customs of the Egyptians and the Canaanites (Lev. 18.3), and the Talmud portrays Resh Lakish as steeped in Roman culture (b.Bava Metsia 84a). Unlike Tamar, however, Rabbi Yohanan is a scholar. Rabbi Yohanan’s Torah scholarship enables him to transform the phallogocentric culture of violence that Resh Lakish represents as a Roman gladiator (and as a new Amnon) into the affective culture of rabbinic intellectual life, with the intimacy and commitment that parallel David’s and Jonathan’s bond.

The Babylonian Talmud, thus, in its tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, offers another example of literary reworkings of the biblical narratives of David and Jonathan by the ancient rabbis, which supports Boyarin’s comment on a parallel between these two narratives (*Unheroic* 135). I suggest that the biblical story of David and Jonathan and the talmudic story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish also share a set of structures that serve to organize the basic elements of each relationship.¹⁴⁴ The rabbinic tale, however, differs from the biblical legend in several

¹⁴⁴ I base this argument on David Halperin’s discussion of some common patterns in the three narratives about heroic friendship in ancient Greek, Assyrian, and Israelite literatures: the stories about Achilles and Patroclus in *Iliad*, Gilgamesh and Enkidu in *Gilgamesh Epic*, and David and Jonathan in 1-2 Samuel. These shared literary elements include a close friendship between two male warriors who form an isolated pair (dyadic relationship); an outward purpose of the relationship (glorious deeds or political ends); a structural asymmetry that affirms the

ways, including the context and goals, which significantly modify some of the shared structural elements.

In the biblical narrative, the analogy or opposition between the love between two men and the “love of women” ends the story of David’s and Jonathan’s relationship, in the final episode of David’s lament after Jonathan’s death. The talmudic tale introduces the dichotomy of “beauty for women” and “strength for Torah” in the very beginning of the relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, during their first encounter. In this way, the rabbinic tale enters into a conversation with Plato, which I discuss in the next section.

The talmudic text borrows the biblical rhetoric of war. References to weapons in Rabbi Yohanan’s and Resh Lakish’s argument parallel the references to weapons in the biblical accounts of David’s and Jonathan’s meetings. In the biblical text, Jonathan’s weapons affirm his bond with David whereas in the talmudic text the discussion of weapons results in breaking Rabbi Yohanan’s and Resh Lakish’s relationship. It is symbolic that the legal issue at stake itself is about swords and knives, which then translates into the verbal fight between two scholars. Resh Lakish’s association with gladiators and the themes of death and murder reinforce the military analogies. Rabbi Yohanan kills his opponent with words like a combatant with weapons, while Resh Lakish’s death alludes to Jonathan’s death in a battle. These elements construct the rabbinic study house as a military space, where scholars engage in “the war of Torah” (Rubenstein, *Culture* 59–61) analogical to the military context of the biblical heroes. This construction is ambivalent. On the one hand, it opposes violence by substituting physical fights with intellectual debates. It counters aggressive masculinity, Roman or Israelite, associated with

hierarchical character of the heroic friendship; and the death of the weaker or less favored friend (Halperin, “Heroes” 78–79).

physical strength and violence, against the soft scholarly masculinity of the rabbinic academy, which, as in Greco-Roman philosophical schools, is associated with knowledge, wisdom, virtue, and self-control. On the other hand, this story represents the rabbinic study hall itself as a site of violence like a gladiator arena and scholars as consumed by rage, engaged in fights with each other, and killing with the words of Torah. David and Jonathan, reimagined as Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, become Torah scholars and study partners; yet the Torah scholars, identified with the biblical heroic couple, turn into warriors.

Rabbi Yohanan parallels David as a beautiful object of erotic gaze, desire, admiration, and romantic commitment, while Resh Lakish, accordingly, performs the role of Jonathan, the one who gazes, desires, and pursues the object of his desire. Like David, Rabbi Yohanan is God's favourite. In the imagination of the rabbis, his authority as a leading scholar of his generation makes him a legitimate heir to the Davidic royal dynasty, leadership over Israel. Hence the talmudic emphasis on Rabbi Yohanan's connection to Jerusalem, David's capital: "I am the last of the beautiful men of Jerusalem." Like Jonathan, Resh Lakish dies. Rabbi Yohanan laments Resh Lakish's death as David lamented Jonathan's death. While David contrasts Jonathan's love against the love of women, Rabbi Yohanan contrasts his relationship with Resh Lakish against his other study partners. The roles of the partners, however, are not linearly analogous.

In terms of structural analogies, the biblical story of David and Jonathan and the talmudic story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish include the following shared elements:

1. The description of one of the partner's beauty that precedes their first encounter.
2. The first meeting that involves the erotic gaze and the immediate attraction.
3. The erotic asymmetry: one partner is represented as the desiring subject while the other as the object of desire.

4. The social asymmetry: a difference in social status and authority.
5. The dual physical/spiritual power distribution in the relationship: the socially inferior partner plays an equally or more significant role.
6. The insider/outsider dialectic.
7. The development of the initial erotic encounter into a life-long commitment, through formal oaths and exchange of gifts.
8. Marriage to the other's sister.
9. The danger to one of the partner's life due to his competing role towards the other.
10. The significance of weapons in the encounters of the partners.
11. The wife's attempt to save her husband.
12. The death of the desiring partner who had initiated the relationship.
13. The lament of the survived, "beloved" partner.

As discussed earlier, the agadot about Rabbi Yohanan that immediately precede the story of his relationship with Resh Lakish recurrently put an emphasis on Rabbi Yohanan's beauty. Consequently, when Resh Lakish meets Rabbi Yohanan, he exclaims: "Your beauty is for women!" Rabbi Yohanan's beauty in b.Bava Metsia 84a parallels the images of David's beauty in his relationships with God, Samuel, and Saul (1 Sam. 16.12; 14-23; 17.38-42): "Now he was ruddy-cheeked, bright-eyed, and handsome" (1 Sam. 16.12); "he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and the Lord is with him" (1 Sam. 16.14-23); "ruddy and handsome" (1 Sam. 17.38-42). In these episodes, David's beauty plays a key role in his ascent to power, in his being chosen by God to become the next king of Israel, and in his suitability for kingship.¹⁴⁵ The images of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty and David's beauty

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Saul being chosen as a ruler due to being "the most handsome" (1 Sam. 9.2). See, however, an alternative tradition that critiques privileging physical appearance in a leader (1 Sam. 16.7). On beauty as a kingly attribute in biblical literature, see Brettler, *God* 72.

resemble the image of Joseph in Genesis: “Now Joseph was well built and handsome (*yefeh-to’ar vifeh mar’eh*). After a time, his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, ‘Lie with me’” (Gen. 39.6-7).¹⁴⁶ The talmudic text makes the connection between Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty and Joseph’s beauty explicit: “The rabbis said to him: ‘Master, are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?’ He said to them: ‘I come from the descendants of Joseph, over whom the Evil Eye has no power’” (b.Bava Metsia 84a). In the biblical and rabbinic legends alike, the beauty represents a special connection to God that justifies one’s authority. In both narratives, male beauty serves as a sign of election by God that legitimizes one’s position of power. According to the biblical narratives, David is chosen by God, Saul, and Jonathan, at least in part, for his beauty (Jennings 6). In the talmudic narrative, Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty signifies his chosen status and his authority of a Torah scholar. The male beauty in both stories, however, is unmanly (feminine or boyish). David is a youth who is perceived to be unfit for masculine military endeavours: “When the Philistine caught sight of David, he scorned him, for he was but a boy, ruddy and handsome” (1 Sam. 17.42). Rabbi Yohanan is perceived as inferior to other rabbis due to his lack of facial hair (b.Bava Metsia 84a). Apparently, the perceived unmanliness of the character serves to prove that the source of his authority and power is spiritual (being chosen by God) rather than his own physical strength. It may also show his subordinate, “feminized” status in relation to the male God. The description of David’s beauty in the biblical episode of David’s and Jonathan’s first

¹⁴⁶ Works in critical scholarship that point to the analogies between the images of David’s beauty in Samuel and Joseph’s beauty in Gen. 37-45 note that in both legends the hero’s beauty attracts the desire of more powerful men and women and thus plays the central role in the hero’s rise to power (Lefkowitz 91; Goldman 80; Speiser). The biblical texts use the same terms to describe the male beauty of Joseph, which arouses desire of Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39), and the female beauty of Rachel, which arouses desire of Jacob (Gen. 29): “Rachel was shapely and beautiful (*yefat-to’ar vifat mar’eh*). Jacob loved Rachel” (Gen. 29.17-18). Whereas the NJPS translation employs different epithets (“well built and handsome” for Joseph and “shapely and beautiful” for Rachel), the original biblical texts use the same phrase in both instances, with masculine and feminine endings respectively (*yefeh-to’ar vifeh mar’eh*; *yefat-to’ar vifat mar’eh*). A similar language is used in 1 Samuel to portray David: *ish to’ar* (“handsome in appearance”) in 1 Sam. 16.18; *im-yefeh mar’eh* (“handsome”) in 1 Sam. 17.42.

encounter (1 Sam. 18.1-4; 19.1) is followed by the account of Jonathan's attraction to David immediately upon seeing him: "When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself" (1 Sam. 18.1-4). In a similar manner, following several depictions of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty, the Talmud tells the reader about Resh Lakish's attraction to Rabbi Yohanan: "One day Rabbi Yohanan was swimming in the Jordan. Resh Lakish saw him¹⁴⁷ and jumped into the Jordan after him" (b.Bava Metsia 84a).¹⁴⁸ In both accounts, biblical and rabbinic, the relationship between two men begins with the erotic gaze and the pursuit of a beautiful male as the object of desire.

The initial erotic encounter develops into a life-long commitment. The partners affirm their mutual commitment through formal oaths and the exchange of gifts. David and Jonathan make several oaths of mutual commitment, exchanging clothes and weapons (1 Sam. 18.1-4; 1 Sam. 20.1-11; 1 Sam. 20.12-23; 1 Sam. 20.35-42; 1 Sam. 23.15-18). Resh Lakish commits to being Rabbi Yohanan's student and study partner while Rabbi Yohanan commits to being Resh Lakish's family and mentor, making him into "a great man."

In a move that is disturbing from the modern perspective yet conventional in the historical context, Rabbi Yohanan offers his sister as a symbolic gift that formalizes the relationship between two men. The motif of exchange of women is central in both legends. The two men

¹⁴⁷ In some manuscripts: "and thought he was a woman." The standard edition of the Babylonian Talmud does not contain this additional phrase. Traditional and modern commentators offer two different scenarios, depending on a manuscript version: a) Resh Lakish mistook Rabbi Yohanan for a woman, since the latter had no beard (David Altschuler, Metzudat David); and b) Resh Lakish was aware that he was chasing a man (Fox-Ashrei; Steinsaltz 122; Epstein 480). Boyarin reads the image of Rabbi Yohanan in this narrative as female beauty in a male body ("Why" 55) or as a suggestion that Resh Lakish perceived beardless Rabbi Yohanan "as the appropriate object of a pederastic desire" (*Unheroic* 130 n. 8). Kosman, in a similar way, suggests that Resh Lakish took Rabbi Yohanan for a woman in a metaphorical sense, as an effeminate male (Kosman 138). The plain meaning of the standard version of the text, however, does not suggest that Resh Lakish was mistaken with respect to Rabbi Yohanan's gender.

¹⁴⁸ The scene of Resh Lakish being aroused by Rabbi Yohanan bathing in the river also reminiscences to the biblical episode of David being aroused by Bathsheba bathing (2 Sam. 11.1-15).

enter a marriage-like relationship by becoming brothers-in-law, through one's marriage to another's sister: David marries Michal, Jonathan's sister (1 Sam. 18.21)¹⁴⁹; Resh Lakish marries Rabbi Yohanan's sister who remains unnamed (b.Bava Metsia 84a). Like Michal, Resh Lakish's wife later attempts to save her husband's life, but, unlike Michal, she fails in doing so. The role of a woman is thus crucial in establishing the relationship between the men through kinship, a cross-sex marriage. By marrying Rabbi Yohanan's sister, Resh Lakish symbolically marries Rabbi Yohanan, the object of his desire. The theme of marriage thus has a homoerotic connotation, creating an erotic triangle.¹⁵⁰ Later in the narrative, Rabbi Yohanan's sister expresses a concern about her brother's cruelty towards Resh Lakish, her husband, a concern that Rabbi Yohanan dismisses with misused quotations from the Torah. Kosman reads this episode as a rabbinic critique of its own misogynistic culture, pointing out that Rabbi Yohanan's sister challenges the sages' male power ("R. Yohanan" 137-138).

Both legends present the asymmetry of social status and authority. Jonathan is a prince whereas David is a shepherd. Rabbi Yohanan is a leading scholar of his generation whereas Resh Lakish is a gladiator or robber. There is also a power balance between the spiritual (intellectual) and the physical aspects of the relationship. Jonathan is a prince, while David is Saul's (possibly also Jonathan's, as Jennings suggests) armour-bearer; yet David is the one chosen by God. Rabbi Yohanan is the mentor; he is more learned in Torah and closer to God, while Resh Lakish is his

¹⁴⁹ Some scholars understand the relationship of David and Jonathan as analogical to marriage, pointing to interchangeable roles of Michal and Jonathan as love partners of David. Jonathan's love of David and their commitment rituals parallel Michal's love of David and their marriage (1 Sam. 18.20-21). Some suggest that Michal is a legal substitute for Jonathan (Peleg 187), that Jonathan replaced Michal as David's love partner (Jennings 26; Ackerman 157; Halperin, "Heroes" 83), or that Jonathan performed the role of a woman in relation to David (Berlin 91; Peleg 171-75). David's entering Saul's house can be seen as David's "double wedding," to Michal and to Jonathan, while the "covenant" between David and Jonathan resembles a marriage contract (Halperin, "Heroes" 83, 185-186; Ackerman 110; Peleg 179-80).

¹⁵⁰ This motif became typical in representations of male homosocial bonds in Western literature (Sedgwick, *Between*).

student and assistant; yet Resh Lakish is physically stronger; he is more familiar with the real world and can better apply Torah to real life. Halperin notes that the biblical narratives of David and Jonathan differentially distribute secular and sacred eminence: “in the secular order, Jonathan is David’s superior; in the sacred order, however, David is Jonathan’s superior” (“Heroes” 78). One can see a similar pattern in the talmudic narrative of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish. There is also an interplay between the notions of insider and outsider. David belongs to a different tribe (the tribe of Judah) than Jonathan (the tribe of Benjamin); in this way David is an outsider at Saul’s court. In the Talmud, Resh Lakish, a Roman gladiator, is an outsider at the rabbis’ Academy; he only achieves his status of scholar and joins the rabbinic elite later in life, through his relationship with Rabbi Yohanan, who, like the biblical Jonathan does to David, takes him under his wing and protects him. Note the role reversal here: in contrast to the biblical legend, in the rabbinic tale the outsider is not the beautiful partner but the one who desires him. This role reversal, however, serves the same purpose. In the biblical text, the reader knows that the house of Saul to which Jonathan belongs is rejected by God and doomed whereas David and his tribe of Judah are chosen by God; hence Jonathan is an actual outsider in relation to the dynasty of David, to the royal house of Israel “as we know it.” In the Talmud, while Resh Lakish joins the intellectual elite, Rabbi Yohanan retains his chosen status throughout the narrative.

In both legends, the life of one partner is in danger due to his competing role relative to the other. David, who presents a threat to Saul’s dynasty, is nearly murdered by Saul and is forced to flee from Saul’s anger (1 Sam. 19.1; 1 Sam. 20.1-11; 1 Sam. 20.24-34; 1 Sam. 23.15-18). Resh Lakish, who challenges the authority of Rabbi Yohanan, falls ill and dies because of Rabbi Yohanan’s anger. The wife attempts to save her husband: Michal helps David escape from Saul

(1 Sam. 20.1-11); Resh Lakish's wife pleads with Rabbi Yohanan to forgive Resh Lakish (b.Bava Metsia 84a).

In both legends, the relationship ends with the death of the partner who initiated the relationship: Jonathan is killed in the battle; Resh Lakish dies of his illness. In the Bible, following the traditional pattern of heroic friendship, the subordinate partner dies, and the grieving survivor expresses the culmination of his affection in his lament (cf. Gilgamesh's lament for Enkidu). Although, according to the biblical narrative, David is not involved in Jonathan's death, Jonathan is an expendable partner, the one whose death paves the way for the further adventures of David, the principal hero of the biblical narrative (Halperin, "Heroes" 79). In Bava Metsia, however, Rabbi Yohanan is the one who is responsible for his friend's death (Rashi; Fonrobert; Greenberg): due to his lack of compassion, he refuses to forgive Resh Lakish or to pray for him. In the rabbinic narrative, the loss of the subordinate partner (the subject of desire) puts an end to the accomplishments and to the life of the survivor (the object of desire). Along with the themes of danger and loss, the lament that follows the death of the lover in both legends states the meaning and the strength of the love relationship. As Boyarin points out, Rabbi Yohanan's lament for Resh Lakish is the literary equivalent of David's lament for Jonathan, in both cases as the literary pattern of crying out for the lost love characteristic of "the Mediterranean paradigm of heroes and their pals" (*Unheroic* 135). In the biblical narrative, the death is the climax of the relationship, "the occasion of the most extreme expressions of tenderness on the part of the two friends, and it weds them forever (in the memory of the survivor, at least)" (Halperin, "Heroes" 79). The rabbis follow this pattern. Like the biblical David, Rabbi Yohanan in his lament recognizes the value of his relationship with Resh Lakish. In contrast to the biblical legend, the rabbinic tale presents the partner as irreplaceable. Unlike

David, whose major achievements begin after (and due to) Jonathan's death, Rabbi Yohanan loses his high status of a scholar and teacher in the Academy after the death of Resh Lakish, unable to continue his studies and teaching without his partner. Moreover, the death of the partner causes Rabbi Yohanan to lose his mind and to die, which reflects the intensity of the loss of a romantic partner.

The biblical and the rabbinic tales belong to different eras, different contexts, and different literary genres. The biblical story is an example of heroic friendship, a romantic relationship between warriors who belong to royalty (Jonathan is a prince; David is a future king), very much like Greek or Mesopotamian epics such as the Iliad or the Epic of Gilgamesh. The talmudic story presents an aggadic material about legendary Torah scholars and spiritual leaders, which in some ways parallels Hellenistic tales about founders of philosophical schools. These narratives differ in their goals and emphases. The goal of the biblical authors and redactors is to justify the transmission of power from the dynasty of Saul to the Davidic dynasty. The biblical narrative emphasizes the chosen nature and desirability of David, the future king, on both spiritual and physical levels. It also portrays David's close connection to the previous royal house: he is a member of Saul's house, accepted by the royal family through his close relationships with Saul, David, and Michal. Jonathan, the heir to the throne, willingly surrenders his rights to David out of his unconditional love for the latter. The goal of the rabbis is to depict the process of shaping and transmitting the legal tradition of the rabbis and to justify the authority of the Amoraim. The talmudic rabbis emphasize the value of Torah study, the transformative character of relationships between Torah scholars, teachers and students or study partners, and the social and internal dangers that these relationships face.

3.5.2 Rabbis, Plato, and Athenian Pederasty

The relationship of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a is often read as an ideal model of study partnership. This story, however, begins as a relationship between a mentor and a student. I suggest that the ancient rabbis might have developed the concept of study pair, partially, as an adaptation of the intimate teacher-student relationship of the Greek institution of pederasty, especially in Plato's interpretation, in which eros is a necessary step in the acquisition of wisdom.¹⁵¹ The presentation of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a also shows parallels with images of philosophers in Greco-Roman philosophical schools, such as the ideas of conversion to philosophy or the value of frankness of speech.

The dictum in Avot 1.6 ("Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a [study] partner"), while linking the two types of study relationships, also points to differences between these two roles. The later tale in b.Bava Metsia 84 shows a close connection between study-partnership and teacher-student relationship. It also shows a difference between these two types of intellectual relationship. Resh Lakish becomes Rabbi Yohanan's student first and his colleague and study partner later ("Rabbi Yohanan taught Resh Lakish Bible and Mishnah, and made him into a great man"). This proves to be destructive for their study partnership: Rabbi Yohanan could never perceive his former student as truly equal ("Rabbi Yohanan said to him: I have done you good by bringing you under the wings of the Divine Presence"), which leads to the tragic end of the story due to a conflict between the partners that results in their deaths.

¹⁵¹ Compare readings of the biblical David and Jonathan narrative in light of Athenian pederasty by some scholars. These approaches point to the similarities between the biblical representation of David and the Greek image of the beloved, *eromenos*, a beautiful youth courted by a socially superior lover, *erastes* (Jennings 35–36). Jennings draws parallels between the story of David and Jonathan and the relationship of David (or Israel) and God (54), which, in turn, parallels the Greek myth of Zeus and Ganymede (68–69). See also Handelman's reference to some kabbalistic and Hassidic sources that discuss the intimate relation of student and teacher in terms of "soul impregnation," *ibbur* (10).

Talmudic studies scholars have noted connections between some rabbinic narratives and Greco-Roman mythology, folklore, literature, philosophy, popular beliefs, and cultural assumptions, often as examples of resisting and accommodating the dominant Greco-Roman culture, as well as Hellenistic Jewish culture, by the ancient rabbis.¹⁵² For instance, Satlow discusses the rabbinic use of popular Greco-Roman beliefs and texts (311–12). In particular, these works point to Greco-Roman cultural influences upon the Babylonian rabbis (Kalmin, *Babylonia*; Fonrobert, “Plato”; Boyarin, “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia”). There are many works effectively arguing that the Babylonian rabbis’ awareness of Plato’s philosophy is historically possible, for instance, through Neo-Platonic and Christian schools in the Sasanian Persia (Fonrobert, “Plato” 296). Kalmin points to the process of “Palestinianization” of Jewish Babylonia that followed Persian conquests deep into Roman territory, which resulted in the resettlement of thousands of Christian and Jewish inhabitants of the eastern Roman provinces in Persian Mesopotamia (Kalmin, *Babylonia*). Boyarin argues that the ancient rabbis, Palestinian and Babylonian alike, knew and cited Greco-Roman myths and literary works, reworking them for their own purposes and often reversing the meaning of these borrowed narratives (*Carnal* 35–43). Fonrobert notes that a relationship between rabbinic texts and Greek texts is not verifiable, as the talmudic sages never overtly allude to these texts, “but it is at the very least historically possible” (“Plato” 295). For example, the talmudic story of Rashbi’s retreat into the cave in b.Shabbat 33b–34a can be read as an echo of Plato’s allegory of the cave in the *Republic* (Fonrobert, “Plato” 278–80). Midrash Genesis Rabba echoes the Greek myth of the primal androgyne widely used in Greek literature, including Plato’s *Symposium* (Boyarin, *Carnal* 18). The rabbinic terms referring to non-binary gender constructions such as *androginos* (“man-

¹⁵² See Fonrobert’s article for an overview of scholarly works on the influence of Greek mythology on rabbinic literature (“Plato” 279–80).

woman”) or *du partzuf* (“double-faced”) are borrowed from the Greek language. These terms are attested in Greek literature including Plato (Kessler, “Bodies” 64, 69; Strassfeld 57). A midrash on the story of Noah’s nakedness in Gen. 9.20-25 (b.Sanhedrin 70a) echoes the Greek myth of Kronos. A midrash on the Sodom story in Gen. 19 (b.Sanhedrin 109a-b) echoes the myth of Procrustes. The story of Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik and a nazirite in b.Nedarim 9b and b.Nazir 4b echoes the myth of Narcissus.

The rabbis might have engaged with Plato’s ideas of eros and mentorship in the context of Athenian pederasty through Neo-Platonic and Stoic writings popular in the Roman Empire. The Stoics shared Plato’s notion that love and friendship had a spiritual dimension of mutual improvement toward a god-like state. For the Stoic founders, Zeno and Chrysippus, *eros* was “an impulse to make friends (*philopoiia*) on account of the conspicuous beauty of youths” (Konstan, *Classical* 114). Eventually, the Stoics eliminated the sexual component of pederasty in favour of a virtuous passion, a disinterested and educational affection that was identified as *philia* and was supposed to convert the beloved into a Stoic friend (Konstan, *Classical* 114). The conversion process in this case was even more specific than Plato’s: it meant an adherence to a particular philosophical school rather than to philosophy as such. Plato’s influence was also evident in Cicero’s treatment of friendship: Cicero used the etymological connection between *amicitia* and *amor* to confirm the traditional idea of love as that which leads to friendship (*Laelius on Friendship* 8.26). For Cicero, the necessity of *amor* in *amicitia* made the latter an absolute value (as “originated in nature rather than in need”) and ensured its continuity, rather than serving merely as a temporary advantage of practical benefits (*Laelius on Friendship* 8.26). Therefore, the intrinsic value of friendship was determined by its sacred nature as a divine gift of love (6.20). This idea is also close to Aristotle’s discussion of three types of friendship, those based

on pleasure, utility, or virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics*, books 8 and 9, *Eudemian Ethics*, book 7).

These theories of friendship in the thought of Aristotle and Cicero are echoed in the rabbinic idea of “a love that is not dependent on anything,” identified as “the love of David and Jonathan,” in Mishnah (m.Avot 5.16).

The analogy between the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in Bava Metsia 84a and the Greek pederastic relationships has been noted in scholarship. Boyarin suggests a possible connection between b.Bava Metsia 84 and Plato’s *Symposium* (*Unheroic* 131). Boyarin also suggests that the episode of meeting in the Jordan river points to Resh Lakish’s perception of Rabbi Yohanan as an appropriate object of a pederastic desire (*Unheroic* 130 n.8). Steven Greenberg reads the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as a rabbinic critique of the Greek pedagogic model: in the Talmud, the passion for Torah replaces Resh Lakish’s sexual desire for Rabbi Yohanan (*Wrestling* 112). Sienna points out that the tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish is an inverted version of Greek pederasty: in contrast to the Greek conventions, in the Talmud the beautiful youth, Rabbi Yohanan, serves as the mentor of the more masculine partner, Resh Lakish (42).

I would argue that reading a rabbinic narrative in light of the Greek pederastic tradition poses no contradiction to the ban on sexual intercourse between males in the biblical and rabbinic law. In the Greek culture, the ideal pederastic love was often understood as romantic but non-sexual, linked to “philosophy, to virtue, and hence to the elimination of physical pleasure” (Foucault, *History* 226–27). The asymmetry of the roles required the dual character of the pederastic relationship: it was supposed to be erotic for the *erastes*, “the lover,” who was expected to be attracted to the beauty of the youth, but non-erotic for the *eromenos*, “the beloved,” who was expected to admire the intellectual and moral superiority of the mentor rather than to feel sexual

attraction. There is archeological and textual evidence that Athenian pederasty typically did not involve penetrative intercourse (Dover 99–100; Nissinen 60,68), which is the focus of the Levitical law and its rabbinic interpretation. As numerous depictions in the ancient Greek art demonstrate, the pederastic relationships conventionally had an erotic component (the *erastes*’s desire for the *eromenos*’s beauty) and physical intimacy such as bodily contact and intercrural sexual acts (between the thighs), typically without penetration (Dover 99–100; Nissinen 60, 68). These feelings and practices would be categorized as sexual in modern Western society, yet they would not necessarily be perceived as sexual in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures. Since penetrative intercourse is “the defining act” (Satlow, *Tasting* 239) regarding the Levitical prohibition of sex between males in the rabbinic law, as well as for the rabbinic definitions of sex in general (Satlow, *Tasting* 41,126,128, 222), the expected absence of a penetrative intercourse arguably renders Greek pederasty less problematic for the ancient rabbis. The rabbinic literature deemed non-penetrative practices between individuals of same gender or different genders non-sexual and therefore inconsequential in the eyes of the law and society (Satlow, *Tasting* 243). Rabbinic traditions explicitly stated or implied that intercrural intercourse (*derekh ‘averim*) between a male and a female was not considered sexual intercourse and thus did not constitute a transgression of sexual laws such as adultery (b.Sotah 26b; b.Niddah 13b). Following this logic, Rashi on b.Niddah 13b comments that *derekh ‘averim* could not fall under the category of male-male intercourse (*mishkav zakhur*) since it did not involve anal penetration. The Talmud also considered other non-penetrative practices neither prohibited nor punishable (b.Sanhedrin 66b; b.Nedarim 20a; b.Yevamot 63b; b.Niddah 13a-b; b.Yevamot 55b; b.Sotah 26b). In contrast to Jewish Hellenistic writers, such as Philo, who associated the prohibition of

sex between males in Lev. 18.22 and 20.13 with Greek pederasty (Nissinen 95-96, 98),¹⁵³ the ancient rabbis never made such a conceptual connection.

Similar to its Greco-Roman counterparts, the rabbinic culture approved and rendered significant for religious life relationships between males that included admiration of male beauty and sometimes erotic desire and physical and emotional intimacy. The depiction of study-partnership in the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish shares with the Greek pederasty the idea that male-male erotic attraction and emotional intimacy foster friendship, education, and identity, that they advance intellectual, moral, and spiritual improvement. The relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish unfolds within the terms of the Greco-Roman ideas of mentor-student relationship and friendship. As my previous discussion of the Rabbi Yohanan cycle in Bava Metsia 84a shows, the Talmud, like Greek society, understands mentoring and the very process of learning in terms of intellectual procreation through erotic contemplation of male beauty and intimate interactions between scholars. In some ways, it involved appropriating femininity in the male homosocial environment (Boyarin, *Unheroic* chapters 2-3; Fonrobert, “When” 74). The thematic structure of the talmudic discussion in Bava Metsia 84a resembles Plato’s dialogues on friendship and eros such as *Lysis*. The Talmud, similar to Plato, develops the theme of erotic contemplation of male beauty within the context of intellectual procreation, acquiring knowledge, wisdom, and moral virtue. The rabbis, however, employ this theme for their own aims, as a way of reflecting on Jewish identity, rabbinic identity, Jewish masculinity, and Jewish-Roman relations. Toward the end of the narrative, the rabbis shift their focus from the erotic to the ethical, and from the inverted Greek pederastic model of teacher-student relationship to the rabbinic model of study partnership. The story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh

¹⁵³ This reading of Leviticus persists in some works of modern critical biblical scholarship (Elliger; D. Greenberg; Alter; Jennings).

Lakish adopted some elements of the Greek model and resisted some other elements, reworking this model to fit the ancient rabbis' own cultural goals. The comparative analysis of the story of Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's study partnership in b.Bava Metsia 84a and Athenian pederasty as presented in Plato's thought can help understand the interplay of the three components in the rabbinic concept of study partnership: education, romantic friendship, and homoeroticism.

The talmudic tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish demonstrates several parallels with ancient Athenian images of pederastic relationships between mentors-lovers and their students-beloveds (*erastes/eromenos* pairs). The episode of meeting in the Jordan river establishes a relationship that is typical of the *erastes-eromenos* relationship in the pederastic model (Boyarin, *Carnal* 212–19; *Unheroic* 127–50)¹⁵⁴: on their first encounter, Resh Lakish, as *erastes*, “the lover,” is attracted to the beauty of a beardless youth Rabbi Yohanan, and the latter responds to his attention with a non-sexual feeling of admiration of the other's masculinity, as an *eromenos*, “the beloved,” would be expected to do. There are also substantial differences between the talmudic legend and Greek pederasty. In the Talmud, the roles of the lovers are inverted. The asymmetry of their roles is complicated and questioned, ultimately transforming the asymmetrical teacher-student relationship into a more equal and reciprocal study-partnership. The homoerotic desire is sublimated into a heteronormative marriage.

The story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish represents an inverted pederastic relationship: in contrast to the traditional Greek model, in the Talmud a beautiful beardless youth Rabbi Yohanan plays an active, superior role, more suitable for the *erastes* (“the lover”). Rabbi Yohanan, the object of Resh Lakish's desire, is the learned mentor who takes a more masculine

¹⁵⁴ On the conventions of the Greek pederastic models, see also Dover; Cantarella.

man under his wing and educates him. Conversely, Resh Lakish, the virile desiring subject, is an ignoramus who becomes Rabbi Yohanan's student, accepting the latter's superior status as a scholar and mentor (Boyarin, *Carnal* 216; Sienna 42). Within one talmudic episode, one can see a transformation of Rabbi Yohanan from an *eromenos*, or a beautiful object of desire, into an *erastes* who takes an initiative, offering his admirer an opportunity to become his affine and proposing an alliance. This variation of the pederastic model where the beautiful partner, rather than his admirer, assumes the role of the mentoring figure is not foreign to the Hellenic and Hellenistic traditions, where partners sometimes form "a bond in which the equality is so perfect, or the reversibility so complete, that the role of the *erastes* and that of the *eromenos* can no longer be distinguished" (Foucault, *History* 225). Moreover, this role reversal parallels Plato's notion of pederastic relationship as one where the *eromenos*, the beloved one, by virtue of his beauty and erotic appeal, serves as a mentor for the *erastes*, the lover, helping the latter to attain intellectual and spiritual perfection through contemplation of the divine form of beauty.

Typically for Greek pederasty, the committed relationship of two males, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, is formalized by a verbal agreement between them. Their relationship is erotic and romantic yet not explicitly sexual nor necessarily inclusive of penetrative sexual acts.

According to the Greek conventions, the *erastes* pursues an erotic encounter whereas the *eromenos* strives for knowledge and wisdom, which is precisely the pattern in the talmudic narrative where Resh Lakish jumps into the river pursuing the beautiful nude Rabbi Yohanan whereas the latter responds with an offer of shared Torah study.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ An alternative reading of Bava Metsia 84a is that, in contrast to the Greek educational model, the rabbis present physical erotic desires to be supplanted by intellectual pursuits: an invitation to a shared Torah study is Rabbi Yohanan's response to Resh Lakish's sexual advances (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 135; Kosman 132). The substitution of erotic desire with Torah study may point to sublimation of erotic desires through studying (Kalmin, *Sage* 4). It may also suggest an analogy between Torah study and sex or between Torah and eros. Instead of physically seducing the object of his desire, Resh Lakish is himself seduced by Rabbi Yohanan intellectually. Rabbi Yohanan turns the physical fight into an intellectual one and a sexual intercourse into a verbal, intellectual connection (Kosman 131).

Similar to the Greek pederastic model, the relationship of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish involves an asymmetrical distribution of power within the context of mentorship. In the Athenian model of pederasty, the relationship is strictly hierarchical. It implies an asymmetry in the master-disciple relationship, between the superior *erastes*, who is older and masculine, and a younger *eromenos*, who holds a subordinate status that is identical to that of a woman (*eromene*).¹⁵⁶ In the rabbinic legend, the distribution of power is two-fold. In the physical mode, Rabbi Yohanan represents the woman-like *eromenos* (“Your beauty is for women”). Rabbi Yohanan has a signature mark of an *eromenos*: he lacks facial hair. In the Greek pederastic model, beardlessness is a distinctive mark of the *eromenos* because he is a youth who has not reached the status of a man yet and still resembles a woman (Cantarella 37–39). Rabbi Yohanan, who is physically weaker,¹⁵⁷ admires Resh Lakish’s masculinity that manifests in physical strength (“Your strength is for Torah”), as opposed to beauty. On the contrary, Resh Lakish is an *erastes*: he is physically stronger, active, and worldly; he is brave and violent.¹⁵⁸ He admires the youthful, beardless, hairless Rabbi Yohanan and, influenced by Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty,

¹⁵⁶ Some argue that Plato transforms the traditional Greek conception of *eros* from the hierarchical to the reciprocal and from the acquisitive to the creative (Halperin, “Heroes” 130). Plato remodels the homoerotic ethos of classical Athens to emphasize his notions of reciprocity and frankness as a philosophical inquiry, rather than creating asymmetrical social roles: reciprocity finds its ultimate expression in dialogue (Halperin, “Heroes” 132–33). Plato’s conception of pederastic relationship, however, is ambivalent: on the one hand, it is reciprocal (see the lovers’ desire to reunite in Aristophanes’ account of erotic longing in *Symposium* 191e6–192b5); on the other hand, it still operates within the asymmetrical paradigm of pederastic relations (Groneberg 42).

¹⁵⁷ Rabbi Yohanan’s poor health and suffering is a recurrent motif in many rabbinic narratives (b.Ketubot 62a; b.Berakhot 5b). The vulnerability and impermanence of Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty constitutes a serious concern of his colleagues and another reason for his own suffering (b.Berakhot 5b). Indeed, some rabbinic traditions portray Rabbi Yohanan’s physical decline in his old age: he is unable to walk on his own because of his enormous weight, he is unable to see because his eyebrows overshadow his eyes, etc. (b.Ketubot 62a; b.Bava Kama 117a-b).

¹⁵⁸ The rabbinic sources bring numerous examples of Resh Lakish’s violent nature. As a gladiator, he sells himself to the Lydians and eventually gains freedom by killing his masters (b.Gittin 47a). When he disagrees with another sage, he stuffs sand into the mouth of his opponent (Songs of Sg. Rabbah 1.6). Resh Lakish is depicted as guarding orchards, building roads, fighting, and finding himself in numerous dangerous situations. He protects his friends, retrieves Rabbi Yohanan’s possessions from robbers, rescues his kidnapped colleagues, defends the honour of the scholars, and routs offenders to avenge the sages (b.Gittin 47a; b.Sanhedrin 26a; b.Moed Katan 17a).

experiences a spiritual transformation.¹⁵⁹ In the spiritual realm, in the domain of the sacred, the roles are reversed. Rabbi Yohanan is the *erastes*, the master and mentor, the one who is superior, who converts, guides, and nurtures his friend, elevating him to a heightened state of wisdom and virtue.¹⁶⁰ Resh Lakish plays a subordinate role of the *eromenos*. He does so as the object of initiation to the rabbinic world and as Rabbi Yohanan's disciple and assistant. His task is to review and explain Rabbi Yohanan's lectures to younger scholars. In the consequent episodes, when Resh Lakish becomes a sage in his own right, the relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish becomes one of equals, between two scholars and study partners, a relationship that is supposed to be reciprocal. In contrast to the hierarchical mentor-student structure of Greek pederasty, the *havruta* is typically based on a symmetrical relationship between equal study partners, usually of similar age and social status. The relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish is, however, dialectic: it involves the equal status of the sages, yet it retains the essential asymmetry of their roles.

Akin to Athenian pederasty, the goal of the male-male eroticized relationship in b.Bava Metsia 84a is civic and intellectual procreation, cultural reproduction, and the transference of knowledge and identity from the mentor to the student. The traditional institution of pederasty was a form of initiation into Athenian citizenship and into Hellenic culture. Mentorship played the major role in the transference of a social and cultural identity, in the process of the maturation of boys into men and into good citizens of the polis (Konstan, *Classical* 119). In a similar manner, the erotic undertone of Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's friendship serves as

¹⁵⁹ This talmudic balance of the power relationship between the spiritual/intellectual and the physical resembles a biblical pattern in the story of David and Jonathan. See Halperin's discussion of the latter ("Heroes" 78).

¹⁶⁰ Many Babylonian rabbinic traditions describe Rabbi Yohanan as superhuman. His blessings bring life and his curses cause death (see the end of b.Bava Metsia 84a; cf. b.Bava Kama 117a-b and b.Shabbat 112b). Rabbi Yohanan's colleagues show great reverence for him, similar to the conventional treatment of sacred objects (b.Yoma 53a; b.Kiddushin 71b).

a necessary condition for the acquisition of wisdom and virtue in the process of mentoring and learning, while the ethos of the erotic-romantic relationship is educational and moral. As in the Athenian institution of pederasty, Rabbi Yohanan, as a mentor, initiates Resh Lakish into the rabbinic community of Torah scholars and into the rabbinic ideal of manliness: “He taught him the Torah and the Mishnah, and he made him a great man” (b.Bava Metsia 84a).¹⁶¹

The rabbinic text echoes Plato’s interpretation of Athenian pederasty, according to which the goal of the mentor-student relationship is first and foremost philosophical, an intellectual, moral, and spiritual transformation, attaining wisdom and virtue through erotic contemplation and emotional attachment. The story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish echoes Plato’s idea of *eros* as a necessary initial step within a pederastic relationship as a sacred friendship between philosophers that leads to moral and intellectual maturation (*Lysis*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*). Plato views *eros* as an ideal form of friendship (Baltzly and Eliopoulos 17), a relationship that, through the lover’s desire for beauty, enables an ethical and spiritual transformation of the partners in their pursuit of virtue and their ascent to the divine. Plato’s concept of *eros* is ethical and aesthetic rather than sexual. It is a love of the good identified as the beautiful (*Lysis* 216D1-5). Beauty is the way to achieve the good, which implies that beauty is not necessarily physical, but primarily moral and intellectual, as it is in Socrates’ case (*Symposium* 205d10–e5; 206a11; 206e5). Therefore, Plato perceives the love between men as superior to the love between a man and a woman because it does not necessarily involve sexual acts (*Phaedrus* 250e; *Symposium* 208e). The purpose of physical beauty is not pleasure. Rather, the esthetics have a sacred

¹⁶¹ Putterman points to parallels between Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a, Adam in Gen. 2-3, and Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. In this reading, Rabbi Yohanan plays the role of Eve or the temple harlot who through seduction bring knowledge and wisdom to the respective heroes. In all of these three narratives, with the interplay of the images of nakedness and clothes, sexuality is associated with transformation and acculturation: it helps wild men to enter the civilized world, while also signifying the loss of their natural capacities.

meaning: it reflects the divine and, in the process of perfection, connects to the divine. In Plato's interpretation of the pederastic model, the beloved (*eromenos*) is a representation of the Form of Beauty, a divine category that inspires religious awe and stimulates a regrowth of "the wings of the lover's soul" (*Phaedrus* 254e). Eros is therefore a process of spiritual, moral, and intellectual growth, with erotic love eventually transformed into an intellectual friendship of philosophers. As an image of love (*Phaedrus* 255c-e), friendship becomes the focal point of Plato's discussion of *eros*: it enables one's contemplation of the Forms and conversion to philosophy.¹⁶² Similarly, in the myth of Diotima in the *Symposium*, Plato presents Eros as a transition from one mental state to another. He describes this process of philosophical conversion by using the metaphor of procreation: a mental conception, pregnancy, and giving birth engender "wisdom and the rest of virtue" (*Symposium* 209b8; cf. *Phaedrus* 278a6). Hence, Plato appropriates feminine prerogatives such as procreation, and transfers them to the male realm, thereby changing the traditional Greek idea of masculinity (Halperin, "Heroes" 127–29, 130, 144). This transformation inspires the renewal of the "soul's wings" and allows a reunion of the friends-lovers with the divine (*Phaedrus* 255e2-b7). One can see a similar imagery in the Talmud. In Bava Metsia 84a, the depictions of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty and the idea of Torah study convey the idea of spiritual, intellectual, and moral conversion that echoes Platonic imagery of the recollection of the divine Form of Beauty. Rabbi Yohanan represents an imagined homoerotic lineage of the talmudic sages that goes back to the biblical heroes. As such, he produces spiritual sons, who are beautiful and learned like him, through the women's contemplation of his beauty by the ritual bath. Later, Rabbi Yohanan makes Resh Lakish his spiritual offspring, "a great man," reminding Resh Lakish that he had brought him "under the wings of the Divine Presence"

¹⁶² Halperin argues that this aspect demonstrates Plato's "clear break with the conventional ethos of Athenian pederasty" ("Heroes" 132).

(b.Bava Metsia 84a). As in Plato's discussions of pederasty, in the rabbinic narratives the contemplation of male beauty serves as a major element of intellectual, moral, and spiritual perfection, attaining wisdom, virtue, and a god-like state. As for Plato, for the rabbinic storytellers the beauty of the talmudic sage is a divine representation. In rabbinic narratives, Rabbi Yohanan's beauty, as well as his piety and knowledge, reflects the perfection of God and the Torah. The male rabbinic beauty affirms the legitimacy of the rabbis and their succession of authority. To convey this message, the Amoraim employ the traditional Greek conceptual framework and imagery.

The rabbinic motif of a transformative relationship also bears the meanings of repentance and conversion that were common in Greco-Roman philosophical schools: "Rabbi Yohanan said, 'If you repent, I will give you my sister, who is more beautiful than I.' Resh Lakish accepted upon himself [to study Torah]" (b.Bava Metsia 84a).¹⁶³ Resh Lakish, a Roman gladiator and a bandit, becomes a Jewish scholar. Resh Lakish's conversion to the rabbinic world of Torah study parallels Greco-Roman idea of conversion to philosophy or to a particular school of philosophy.¹⁶⁴ Repentance and conversion, the process of the "turning from luxury and self-indulgence and superstition to a life of discipline and sometimes to a life of contemplation, scientific or mystic" (Nock 179), are traditional themes in Hellenistic philosophical schools. Plato, Cicero, and other thinkers often speak of the Greek *epistrophe* or Latin *conuersio* (later used by Christians for "conversion") as an orientation or focusing of the soul, the turning from

¹⁶³ Kosman suggests that Resh Lakish's repentance motivated by lust could be a rabbinic parody of the conventional repentance tales ("R. Johanan" 131). Bar-Asher Siegal points to parallels between the image of Resh Lakish in this episode and the motif of monastic repentant robber in Christian literary tradition (54).

¹⁶⁴ The theme of conversion into the intellectual elite also represents a complex relationship of the rabbis with non-rabbinic groups. It has been read as a polemic of Babylonian Amoraim against Palestinian Amoraim, in particular, as a critique of their outreach activities and their promotion of equality of teachers and students (Kalmin, *Sage* 1–5). It appears, however, that the narrative supports the authority of the Amoraim in the Land of Israel and affirms the idea of equality.

carelessness to true piety (Nock 179, 182–83). This transformation involves repentance, *metanoia* (Nock 180), renunciation of the material world and its pleasures, which implies an opposition between the values of philosophers and those of common people (Nock 185).¹⁶⁵ Similar to the Greco-Roman philosophical traditions, rabbinic sources elsewhere emphasize Rabbi Yohanan’s rejection of the material goods and his deliberate choice of poverty: “a scholar (*talmid hakham*) is one who neglects his business for study” (y.Moed Katan 3:7, 83b; Song of Sg. Rabbah 8.7; y.Ta’anit 21a). The contrast between the ascetic piety of Rabbi Yohanan and the wild self-indulgence of Resh Lakish enforces the idea of conversion as turning from self-indulgence to a life of discipline and intellectual pursuits.¹⁶⁶ In contrast to Rabbi Yohanan, Resh Lakish is an outsider, “‘ethnically’ Jewish but culturally Roman gladiator” (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 135). He represents Roman aggressive masculinity and uncontrolled sexuality as opposed to the rabbinic study hall (Putterman), in the same way as uncontrolled sexuality was perceived to be opposed to philosophical schools in the Greco-Roman world (Satlow). By the time Resh Lakish meets Rabbi Yohanan, his only advantage is his physical strength. His intellectual and moral qualities, as well as his social status, still require development.¹⁶⁷ The encounter with Rabbi Yohanan signifies an existential transformation for Resh Lakish: “Resh Lakish accepted upon himself [to repent]. He wished to return [with a jump] to get his clothing, but he was unable to do so. Yohanan taught Resh Lakish the Bible and the Mishnah, and made him into a great man” (b.Bava Metsia 84a).

¹⁶⁵ Although conversion to a philosophical school requires loyalty to the community of the scholars and their traditions (Nock 181), it does not influence one’s civic identity and loyalty to the local polis and ethnos, unlike those deliberate acts of religious commitment in early Christian communities (North 178). A. D. Nock asserts that the popularity of conversion to philosophical schools resulted from the pluralization of the ancient society and the emerging tensions between various groups (179).

¹⁶⁶ Reading this tale in terms of self-restraint by some of the traditional Jewish commentators, such as Ritva, echoes the conventions of masculinity in Hellenistic philosophical schools.

¹⁶⁷ Some other rabbinic traditions portray Resh Lakish as a carnivalesque figure, a slave, a gladiator, a burglar, and a murderer, who engages in gluttony and debauchery and uses his belly as a cushion to recline on (b.Gittin 47a).

Resh Lakish's change of identity, his conversion to the rabbinic world of Torah, a transformation from a Roman gladiator into "a great man," a leading Jewish scholar manifests itself in his inability to reach his clothes after his encounter with Rabbi Yohanan in the Jordan's waters (Holzer, "Either"; Kosman; S. Greenberg).¹⁶⁸ His old Roman clothes are no longer his. Resh Lakish's inability to jump back across the river a second time signifies the priority of intellectual strength over physical strength. In rabbinic culture, physical weakness of a sage, a symbolic manifestation of his intense studies, manifests his intellectual strength. The idea that study makes one weaker is common in rabbinic literature. For example, the rabbis claim that Torah study "debilitates man's strength" (b.Sanhedrin 26b). There are stories about rabbis who lost their physical strength after studying Torah (Song of Sg. Rabbah 5.14; Midrash Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 21.11). In this sense, Rabbi Yohanan's lack of physical strength signifies his status as a Torah scholar. In a similar manner, as soon as Resh Lakish repents and "accepts the yoke of Torah," he loses much of his vigour. The mere decision to study Torah so depleted his strength that he was unable to haul his heavy equipment.¹⁶⁹

Similar to Plato's concept of pederasty, the rabbinic account presents the repentance and conversion as caused by eros: Resh Lakish's admiration of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty and his

¹⁶⁸ For the symbolism of water and clothes as signifiers of identity change in this story, see Holzer; Kosman; Greenberg.

¹⁶⁹ The physical weakness of the scholar could also be understood as a sign of feminization and a loss of masculine vigor (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 138). According to Boyarin, the sages affirm a positive feminized image of the Jewish male, "a kinder, gentler male" (*Unheroic* 134). The Study Hall is seen as a space of non-hierarchical and nonviolent philosophic *eros*, desexualized homoerotic Wisdom that requires mutuality and reciprocity (Boyarin, "Why" 57, 64). Alternatively, Satlow notes the elusiveness of rabbinic conception of masculinity, which is functional, rather than ontological: it is the result of a cultural transformation. Similar to the Greco-Roman ideal of the manliness of a philosopher, rabbinic manhood is understood as self-restraint that manifests through scholarship among the intellectual elite. Accordingly, the feminizing effect of male homoeroticism signifies loss of control and, consequently, presents a danger to the masculine identity of the rabbis (Satlow, "Try" 20). Putterman relates the rabbinic notion of physical weakness of Torah scholars to sexuality. Putterman draws parallels between the rabbinic notion of debilitating effect of Torah study and the notion of debilitating effect of sex that rabbinic literature shared with Greco-Roman medical thought (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*; b.Berakhot 57b; b.Sanhedrin 82b). Resh Lakish's weakness after becoming Rabbi Yohanan's student corresponds to weakness after sex, since the ancient rabbis see Torah study itself as an erotic act (Putterman).

sexual desire would lead him to the world of Jewish scholarship under Rabbi Yohanan's mentorship and, ultimately, "under the wings of the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*)."¹⁷⁰

3.5.3 The Marriage Metaphor of Rabbi Yohanan's and Resh Lakish's *Havruta*

The tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a and its interpretive history draw analogies between study partners and a married couple. In the talmudic story, the heteronormative marriage between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan's sister serves to affirm the bond between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan. As such, it represents a marriage-like union between two male scholars. Some traditional commentators read Resh Lakish's and Rabbi Yohanan's relationship itself as a metaphorical marriage.

In the beginning of the story, Resh Lakish, following Rabbi Yohanan's proposal, simultaneously marries Rabbi Yohanan's sister and becomes Rabbi Yohanan's student and study partner. In this way, the talmudic text represents study partnership and marriage as analogous and isomorphic relationships: the former expresses the intellectual intimacy between scholars while the latter manifests the sexual aspect of their relationship (Rabbi Yohanan emphasizes that his sister is as beautiful as he). Boyarin sees Rabbi Yohanan's sister as personification of the Torah, which is often portrayed in rabbinic literature as eroticized female. Both the Torah and the real woman represent shared female objects, a medium of erotic exchange between men in the homosocial environment of the Study Hall, *Beit Midrash* (Boyarin, "Why" 53).

¹⁷⁰ Rabbeinu Tam, a medieval Jewish commentator, rejects the themes of conversion and mentorship. Based on Resh Lakish's later comment "There they called me 'Master' (*rabbi*), and here they call me 'Master' (*rabbi*)" (b.Bava Metsia 84a), Rabbeinu Tam asserts that Resh Lakish had been a scholar (*rabbi*) in his youth, before becoming a gladiator (or robber). According to this interpretation, no conversion could occur at the time of their meeting; therefore, Rabbi Yohanan's role in Resh Lakish's education was not crucial. This radical reading runs counter to the rabbinic text, which explicitly states that "Rabbi Yohanan taught Resh Lakish Bible and Mishnah and made him into a great man" (b.Bava Metsia 84a).

The ending of the talmudic story associates the study partner with an irreplaceable soulmate. After the loss of his study partner Resh Lakish, Rabbi Yohanan quits his academic work and dies, too. The efforts of Rabbi Yohanan's colleagues to find another study partner for him, "to relieve Rabbi Yohanan's mind," fail.¹⁷¹ In the talmudic depiction of Rabbi Yohanan's grief after the death of Resh Lakish, Rabbi Yohanan refuses to replace Resh Lakish with a new study partner:

Are you like the son of Lakish? When I would say something, the son of Lakish would raise twenty-four objections against me, and I would give him twenty-four answers, and the statement would thereby be clarified. And you say: "There is a teaching that supports your opinion." Do I not know that what I say is right? Rabbi Yohanan went around rending his clothes and weeping, and saying: "Where are you, son of Lakish? Where are you, son of Lakish?" And he cried out until his mind slipped from him. The rabbis pleaded for mercy on his behalf, and he died. (b.Bava Metsia 84a)

The ancient rabbis and Greco-Roman philosophers shared the understanding of intimacy as the basis for intellectual honesty, understood as necessary requirements for both friendship and learning. Plato reinterprets *eros* as a type of moral and intellectual self-expression (Halperin, "Heroes" 138). Plato uses the conventional Greek construction of *eros*, within the conceptual framework of pederasty, to advance his views on what the pursuit of the truth entails. Within the context of the philosophical exchange of ideas, the intimacy of friendship provides an opportunity for trust and, consequently, intellectual honesty. Plato understands love in an erotic relationship as a condition for intellectual honesty and the search for the truth through a

¹⁷¹ In a similar manner, the ending of the rabbinic story of Honi HaMe'agel, "either *havruta* or death" (b.Taanit 23a), suggests the idea of the impossibility of scholarship and life itself without the right study partner (see my earlier discussion of this story).

philosophical dialogue. In this way, frankness is associated with intimacy (Konstan, *Classical* 152). This Platonic concept originates in the value of the liberty of speech that is central to the civic ideal of the democratic Athenian *polis* (Konstan, “Frankness” 8–9). Hellenistic philosophical schools often use the social ideal of frank criticism as a pedagogical practice (Konstan, *Classical* 112; Konstan, “Frankness” 12–13). In Roman society under the empire, emphasis on utility as a necessary component of friendship,¹⁷² expressed in the exchange of benefits, became an important trend, especially in political friendship (De Blois 131). In this manner, Plato’s idea of intellectual honesty that is based on erotic or romantic intimacy acquired a new meaning of honesty toward superiors. Consequently, frankness of speech, as opposed to flattery, becomes a major theme in the Hellenistic and Roman discussions of friendship (Konstan, “Frankness” 10–14). Konstan points to “a new interest [in imperial Rome] in sincerity as opposed to services between friends, exhibited also in the concern with candor and flattery both among political commentators and in the pedagogical therapies of the philosophical schools” (*Classical* 148).

This context may explain the rabbinic interest in the issue of frankness of speech between study-partners. It also parallels the centrality of this theme in rabbinic literature, such as in the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a. Midrashic authors assert that “love unaccompanied by reproof is not [true] love” (Gen. Rabbah 54.3). The Tannaim in m.Avot 5.16 follow Greco-Roman thinkers, drawing on Aristotle, in their assertion that a useful friendship is not durable. The Amoraim, in their turn, construct the relationship of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as one that proves to be useful for both partners precisely because of

¹⁷² Aristotle distinguishes between three types of friendship: those based on pleasure, utility, or virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics*, books 8 and 9, *Eudemian Ethics*, book 7).

Resh Lakish's intellectual frankness, his ability to challenge his partner in a dialectical debate, as Rabbi Yohanan realizes at the end. The issue of utility, however, appears to destroy the friendship: the two rabbis never reconcile after their argument. Nevertheless, the structure of the story demonstrates that, despite the tension, the relationship of the sages endures. Their bond is unbreakable, which suggests a model of friendship based on virtue, the only enduring type of relationship in the Aristotelian scheme and the distinctive friendship of sages in the Stoic tradition.¹⁷³

Some traditional interpretations of the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish teach about the significance of scholarly debates in Jewish intellectual life. These commentators illustrate this idea by emphasizing the role of the *havruta* partner as metaphorical wife. They employ the sexualized imagery of marriage and the feminized image of the Torah scholar as bride.

In the eighteenth century, Jacob Reischer (Iyyun Ya'akov), a Talmud commentator who was born in Prague, served as a rabbi in Austrian Galicia and then in Germany, reads the talmudic text as follows: "the twenty-four objections of Resh Lakish to Rabbi Yohanan hint at the Midrashic notion that a scholar should adorn himself with the twenty-four books of the Bible just as a bride adorns herself on her wedding day." This metaphor inverts the traditional imagery of Torah as female lover by depicting the male scholar as a bride (not a groom!) of the Torah. The reference to the books of the Bible adorning the scholar suggests that the role of the Torah here is instrumental. The scholar's marriage here is not with the Torah. In this image, the Torah is a decoration of a scholar that makes him more attractive and marks him as a bride at his wedding

¹⁷³ Nevertheless, the Stoic idea of friendship between sages is rather impersonal. The possibility of replacing friends is a standard idea for the Stoics, e.g., Seneca *Ep. mor.* 9.5-6 (Konstan, *Classical* 113). A Stoic sage is self-sufficient; the loss of a friend cannot distress him. The wise man values friendship in general, yet he is unconcerned about the identity of any one particular friend, e.g., Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 9.5 (Graver 183).

with another scholar, his study partner. The partner's exchange of the words of Torah metaphorically serves as intimacy between lovers, newlyweds. The Torah serves to homoeroticize the relationship between scholars and to legitimize their union. In Reischer's interpretation, Resh Lakish is Rabbi Yohanan's bride.

Over a century later, Mordechai Yosef Leiner (Mei Shiloach), the Isbitzer Rebbe, a nineteenth-century Hasidic thinker from Poland, describes the relationship of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as paradigmatic *havruta* in terms of marriage. Leiner applies the role of the wife to Resh Lakish in his relationship with Rabbi Yohanan, by depicting Resh Lakish as the "fitting helper," *ezer kenegdo* (23–24), which in Gen. 2.18 refers to Eve in her relationship to Adam. Since the Biblical Hebrew *kenegdo* (derived from *neged*, "what is in front of") can mean "corresponding to him" or "opposite of him," in rabbinic and medieval Jewish exegesis *ezer kenegdo* is sometimes understood as "both helper and opponent" (b.Yevamot 63a; Rashi), which is the basis of Leiner's analogy between *havruta* and marriage as opportunities for positive criticism between partners. Apparently, Leiner's interpretation, which attributes the role of metaphorical wife to Resh Lakish as a *havruta* partner through the biblical image of Eve as *ezer kenegdo*, develops the exegetical theme of Avot 6.6, which terms the attachment between study partners as "clinging," *dibbuk haverim*, using the wording of the biblical description of the union between Adam and Eve as the model for man's "clinging" to his wife "so that they become one flesh" (Gen. 2.24; see my discussion above). Both the Tannaim in Avot and Leiner apply the same biblical image of heterosexual marital union from Genesis 2 to the relationship between two male study partners.

In traditional Jewish texts, these marriage metaphors and allusions meant to convey ideas such as closeness of study partners' relationship, the piety of Torah scholars, or the importance

of dialectics for studying. A modern queer reading, however, would suggest a parallel between the intimacy of male study partners and marital intimacy, a parallel that contributes to the construction of the literary trope of queer *havruta*.

3.5.4 Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as a Gay Couple: A Contemporary Reception of the Talmudic Tale

The talmudic story of paradigmatic study partners, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, from b.Bava Metsia 84a increasingly becomes a major source of identification for modern gays or a possible mode of experience for queers in the context of traditional *havruta* in today's Jewish culture. For instance, references to the tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish play an important role in representing queer *havruta* in Elbaum's 2007 film *And Thou Shalt Love (V'ahavta)* mentioned above. A central homoerotic scene in the film is the episode of studying the talmudic narrative of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in *havruta* by the two protagonists, Ohad and Nir, students in a yeshiva of the Israel Defense Forces. This episode serves as an "intimate vocal duet" (Padva 431), when one partner reads the original Aramaic phrases and the other translates each sentence into modern Hebrew, accompanied by erotic gazes and a sentimental melody. As Padva notes, reciting this rabbinic tale of same-sex desire and Torah study in Elbaum's film "homoeroticizes Ohad and Nir's intimate friendship," and yet the homoeroticism of this activity is predicated upon Ohad's queer translation of the ancient text and on his partner's (in)ability to decode his homoerotic messages (431–32).

The homoeroticism of the relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish is the main theme of the animated short film of Judith Prays and Samuel Hayes, *Lonely at the Top: A Bromance* (2012), a part of a series of artistic interpretations of the Talmud by Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Narrated from the perspective of Rabbi Yohanan's sister

(Resh Lakish's wife), who remains unnamed both in the Talmud and in the film, the narration is addressed to her and Resh Lakish's son, as a revelation about Resh Lakish's and Rabbi Yohanan's life-long love affair: "I wanna tell you something that you really gotta hear about your father, Resh Lakish, a thug phenomenon, and my pretty boy brother, Rabbi Yohanan" (00:00:26-33). The homoeroticism of the marriage-like relationship between the two scholars becomes explicit in the film when Rabbi Yohanan gives Resh Lakish, attracted to Rabbi Yohanan's beauty, a wedding ring, an episode that illustrates the narrator's words: "to keep Reish around [...] he offered Reish marriage to me" (00:01:20-25). The marriage is "to me," to Rabbi Yohanan's sister, yet the actual wedding ring is offered by Rabbi Yohanan to Resh Lakish. The offer is followed by Rabbi Yohanan's call to Resh Lakish for consummation of their desire for each other through shared studying as an intellectual, erotic, and romantic activity: "Let's get in some ta-ta-ta...Torah study" (00:01:28-31). The image of the heart that appears between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish every time when they are engaged in studying together reinforces the theme of *havruta* as love relationship (00:01:36-37, 42-43).

Resources for studying b.Bava Metsia 84a on *Sefaria.com* include quite a few discussions of the *havruta* of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as an example of same-sex love story and Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as queer or gay characters in the Talmud. These works include Ricki Heicklen, "Seeing Ourselves in the Text: Queer Characters in the Jewish Tradition," April 17, 2018 (Heicklen); Alanna Sklover, "Where are the Queer Voices in Tanakh?" May 18, 2018 (Sklover); David Rosenn, "Love Stories of the Rabbis," February 16, 2020 (Rosenn); Laurie Fisher, "Frenemies, A Love Story: Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan," May 12, 2020 (L. Fisher); Ren Finkel, "Gay Talmud Pt. I: Gay River Time," May 29, 2020 (Finkel); Gavi Ruit,

“Queer Stories and the Talmud,” November 8, 2020 (Ruit).¹⁷⁴ These discussions, authored by rabbis, scholars, educators, and writers, which were published at the turn of the second decade of the new millennium, demonstrate an increasingly popular homoerotic reading of the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish and the fact that this talmudic tale has established itself as a foundational text for today’s Jewish LGBTQ culture.

This chapter demonstrated that the concept and imagery of study partnership in rabbinic literature, which were generally adopted and developed in later traditional Jewish sources, were often represented in homoerotic terms. This homoeroticism of the traditional literary representations of study partnership was rooted in heteronormative, androcentric, and misogynistic cultural norms of rabbinic society. From today’s perspective, however, these images can quite often lend themselves to a queer reading. The chapter that follows shows how modern and contemporary Jewish writers employ the traditional homoeroticism of *havruta* and how their works at times resignify the images of *havruta* as a queer cultural trope.

¹⁷⁴ Remarkably, “Rabbi Shimon b. Lakish” appears as one of the four topics related to the tag “Gay” on Sefaria. The other three topics are “Lesbian,” “LGBTQ,” and “Transgender” (<https://www.sefaria.org/topics/gay?tab=sources>).

Chapter Four. Reclaiming *Havruta* Intimacy in Modern and Contemporary Jewish Fiction

This chapter demonstrates that selected works of Jewish fiction produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries build upon the traditional tropes of the male-male intimacy of shared Torah study and resignify these tropes in new contexts. These works depict the homoerotic potential of the traditional *havruta* and yeshiva or imagine possibilities of realization of this homoeroticism by creating new affective, erotic, and/or sexual intimacies. Some of these fictional *havruta* images are heteronormative or homonormative, while some others represent *havruta* intimacy from queer subject positions. As this chapter argues, quite often these representations show a double dynamic, an intersection of queer and normative viewpoints, a dynamic that resists signification and disrupts easy definitions of queerness and normativity.

4.1 From Nostalgic Homoeroticism to Marriage Drag: Queer *Havruta* Images in Jewish Fiction of the Twentieth Century

4.1.1 “Your Souls Had Become Tightly Bound”: Study Partners as Soulmates in S. An-sky’s *The Dybbuk*

S. An-sky (the penname of Shloyme Zanol Rappoport), a prominent Jewish-Russian writer, scholar, and politician, one of the leaders of the Russian socialist movement, wrote the first draft of his play *The Dybbuk, Or Between Two Worlds* in 1914 in Russian (*Mezh dvuch mirov (Dibuk)*),¹⁷⁵ using his collection of Jewish folklore gathered during his ethnographic expedition across the Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire prior to the World War One. He continued

¹⁷⁵ The Russian original was considered to have been lost until its manuscript was discovered in 2001 in the rare book collection of the Lunacharsky Theatrical Library in St. Petersburg (Ivanov).

working on the play around 1914-1916, first in Russian and then in Yiddish (*tsvishn tsvey veltn—der dibek*). The *Dybbuk* was premiered in Yiddish in Warsaw in 1920. It was first translated into English, by Henry G. Alsberg and Winifred Katzin, in 1925. The play is set in nineteenth-century Ukrainian towns, Brinitz and Miropol. It is based on a popular Jewish folk belief in spirit possession (*dybbuk*). The plot follows two yeshiva students, Sender and Nisn, who, out of their close friendship and love for each other, pledge to marry their children to one another if one has a daughter and the other one a son. Eventually, however, they part their ways, as Nisn moves to another shtetl and dies in poverty while Sender becomes a wealthy merchant and forgets about his oath. Sender refuses to marry his daughter Leah to a poor yeshiva student, Khonen, Nisn's son, although Khonen and Leah fall in love with each other. When Khonen dies, his spirit possesses Leah. The rabbinical court presided by a Hassidic miracle-worker Azriel of Miropol fails to reconcile Sender and Nisn and to perform exorcism. Leah dies, and her soul unites with the soul of Khonen.

An-sky connects two traditional themes: a popular belief in spirit possession (the dybbuk) and the normative love relationships between yeshiva students (*dibbuk haverim*). *The Dybbuk* demonstrates the motif of establishing a quasi-marital relationship between two male study partners through a heteronormative marriage. It depicts *havruta* partners in the yeshiva as soulmates (*basherter*), whose souls are bound up together. The theme of a marital relationship is reinforced by the motif of commitment: the partners make an agreement (An-sky 140-141, 154-155), and failure to fulfil one's obligation leads to a trial in a rabbinical court (An-sky 142-143). Two male *havruta* partners in the yeshiva, Sender and Nisn, make an oath that their children will get married to each other as an expression of the fathers' love for each other. At the trial, the ghost of Nisn tells the story of betrayed love and unfulfilled promise:

Sender ben Henye! The righteous deceased, Nisn ben Rivke, claims that in your youth you were study partners [*haverim*] in the yeshiva,¹⁷⁶ and that your souls had become tightly bound in a loyal friendship. The two of you celebrated your weddings on the same day. After your High Holidays meeting at the Rebbe's, you made a solemn promise that if your wives will be blessed with children, one with a boy and the other with a girl, you will marry the children to each other [lit. "you yourself will get married": *vet ir zich miskhatn zeyn*). (An-sky, *Der Dibek* 89; my translation)

The phrase "your souls had become tightly bound in a loyal friendship" alludes to the biblical story of David and Jonathan: "Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David" (1 Sam. 18.1-4).¹⁷⁷ As the souls of their fathers, Nisn and Sender, the souls of Khonen and Leah are said to be bound up as soulmates, *basherter* (An-sky 154-155). The motif of bound souls becomes central to An-sky's play when Khonen's soul literally enters Leah's body as a dybbuk. The ending of the play emphasizes this motif once again by depicting Leah's soul merging with Khonen's soul, "bound forever" after Leah's death (An-sky 182-183). In An-sky's play, the non-sexual love between two male yeshiva students is expected to be consummated through the sexual union between their children, in a way of substitution (as in the case of Resh Lakish's marriage to Rabbi Yohanan's sister in the Talmud). The emerged class difference prevents this

¹⁷⁶ Based on the context of the Yiddish text, *az in der yugnt zayt ir geven haverim in eyn yeshiva* (An-sky, *Der Dibek* 89), it refers to *havruta* partners in the yeshiva rather than to friends in general.

¹⁷⁷ The Russian original, which presents an earlier version of the play, bears a similar meaning of bound souls: "in your youth, you studied in the same yeshiva, and you lived like true soulmates (lit. "you lived soul to soul," *vy zhili dusha v dushu*)" (An-sky, *Mezh*; my translation). The motif of soulmates is reinforced in the Russian version by the next sentence: "to more firmly bind your souls, you offered a hand to one another with a solemn promise that if one has a son and the other has a daughter you will consider them a groom and a bride, and later you will marry them to each other" (An-sky, *Mezh*; my translation). Due to the demands of Russian censorship, An-sky later changed "soul" to "friendship": "to strengthen your friendship" (*Mezh*; my translation). The ambiguity of "united in marriage," present in the Yiddish version, is absent in Russian.

union until it realizes by supernatural means, through spirit possession, which is spiritual and bodily at once.

One can read the phrase *miskhatn zeyn* in the Yiddish text of the play as “become in-laws [mekhutanim]” or as “marry each other.” Hence, *vet ir zikh mishoten zayn* can be translated as “[through your children] you yourself will become united in marriage” (An-sky, *Der Dibek* 89).¹⁷⁸ By becoming in-laws through the marriage of their children, Sender and Nisn would be “joined in marriage” to each other (Seidman, *Plot* 92; Seidman, “Ghosts”). This exchange of women or children signifies the love between two brothers-in-law or between two fathers-in-law. Seidman notes that in *The Dybbuk* this literary motif of “marriages arranged through strong bonds between friends longing to become more than that” represents “the most intimate, quasi-marital connection available to two men in their society” that could be achieved through Torah study and heteronormative marital arrangements (*Plot* 92).

Tony Kushner’s adaptation of An-sky’s play, *A Dybbuk* (1997), makes the subtle homoeroticism of S. An-sky’s play more explicit, highlighting the homoerotic possibilities of the

¹⁷⁸ Cf. 1 Sam. 18: “So Saul said to David, ‘You can become my son-in-law even now through the second one’” (1 Sam. 18.21). In this verse, Saul offers David to marry his younger daughter Michal instead of his older daughter Merab who he had promised him before (1 Sam. 18.17-19). The Biblical Hebrew *bishtayim tithaten* uses *shtayim*, “two” or “both,” rather than *hashenit*, “the second one.” Hence, it can be translated as “with two you will get married” or “you will marry both,” which may refer to Saul’s daughter Michal and Saul’s son Jonathan. This translation would account for the previous verse that stated that Merab had married another man instead of David (1 Sam. 18.19). The verse that follows—“The king is fond of you and all his courtiers like you. So why not become the king’s son-in-law?” (1 Sam. 18.22)—also suggests David’s marriage to Saul himself: “the king desires you [*hafets bekha hamelech*] [...], and now you marry the king [*hithaten bamelech*].” The apparent Saul’s desire for David can explain Saul’s anger (jealousy?) regarding the relationship between David and Jonathan later (1 Sam. 20.30). It should be noted, however, that Biblical Hebrew typically uses *hithaten* as “to become a son-in-law” or “to form a marriage alliance” (BDB 368), and *lakah*, “to take [a wife],” as “to marry” (BDB 542-543). The modern queer reading presented here breaks with the literal meaning of the biblical text, which, in the conventional terms of the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel, defines marriage as kinship between two men, the woman’s husband and her father.

yeshiva and the queer potential of the arranged marriages that can express the consummation of love between *havruta* partners through their children's marriage:

You were both young men in this yeshiva years ago, you were true friends; once during the Days of Awe, when all oaths are especially sacrosanct, you vowed that your love for one another and the union of your souls would one day become flesh. When the women you married had conceived, if the Almighty would make one bear a daughter and one bear a son, these your children would become husband and wife. (Kushner 90)

The study partners' "love for one another" manifests in "the union" of their souls, yet this love also longs for consummation, for the union of the souls to "become flesh." Kushner alludes to the biblical description of Adam's and Eve's union: "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh" (Gen. 2.24). Kushner's adaptation of An-sky's play goes back to Genesis and back to the body.

The two men make an oath¹⁷⁹ to marry each other through the intended arranged marriage of their children. Chonen¹⁸⁰ and Leah are each other's soulmates because their fathers, Nissin¹⁸¹ and Sender, are each other's soulmates. The relationship in both couples is grounded in desire, framed in the erotic imagery of the Song of Song (Kushner 26). Kushner's adaptation emphasizes that the reason for the tragedy is Sender's betrayal of his lover, Chonen. When both men are no longer poor yeshiva students, Sender becomes a rich businessman and forgets Nissin, his former study partner and soulmate (Kushner 92).

¹⁷⁹ Cf. David's and Jonathan's oaths that affirm their love (1 Sam. 18.1-4; 1 Sam. 20.1-11; 1 Sam. 20.12-23; 1 Sam. 20.35-42; 1 Sam. 23.15-18).

¹⁸⁰ This is the spelling in Kushner's adaptation, based on Joachim Neugrochel's translation.

¹⁸¹ See the footnote above.

An-sky's play and Kushner's adaptation highlight the traditional normativity of the love relationship between study partners. Sender's and Nissin's vows are accepted in heaven (An-sky 158-159; Kushner 94). The voice of Nissin, the ghost of the betrayed lover, communicates his complaints through the rabbis, Rabbi Azriel of Miropol, a Hasidic tzaddik and the former teacher of Sender and Nissin, and Rabbi Shimshin, the Chief Rabbi of Miropol, during the trial at the rabbinical court that takes place in the same yeshiva where Sender and Nissin had studied. The rabbis fully approve the love relationship of the yeshiva students *per se*. Rabbi Azriel and Rabbi Shimshin find Nissin's claim against Sender justified. Their decision restores the relationship between Sender and Nissin as that of family: "And for the rest of his life Sender is to burn *yahrzeit* candles and recite the mourner's Kaddish each year for Nissin ben Rivka and for Nissin's son. As if these dead were of his own family" (Kushner 94).

Both An-sky and Kushner represent traditional Jewish marriage as based on the homoeroticism of *havruta*, which, in turn, represents *havruta* as family. This motif can be traced to the rabbinic literature, in particular to the talmudic tale of Resh Lakish's marriage to Rabbi Yohanan's sister that serves as a substitution for the union between two male scholars.

4.1.2 "What Kind of Love Dwelled Between the "Yoshvim": Confessional Yeshiva Narratives in Jiří Mordechai Langer's *The Eroticism of Kabbalah* and Steven Greenberg's *Wrestling with God and Men*

Some of the earliest modern images of yeshiva and *havruta* that explicate and meditate on the homoerotic potential of Jewish intellectual life could be found in confessional narratives of Jiří Mordechai Langer, an Orthodox Jewish homosexual writer from the interwar Prague, a close friend of Franz Kafka and Max Brod. Langer's *The Eroticism of Kabbalah* (*Die Erotik der Kabbala*) written in 1923, which explores the relationship between traditional Judaism and

homosexuality, includes an autobiographic depiction of a Hassidic yeshiva in the town of Belz (today's Ukraine). Langer was a student of the Belz yeshiva during the First World War, at the end of the period when Belz, along with Langer's hometown Prague, belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Langer's insider's knowledge of the Hassidic yeshiva and his connection to the homosexual movements of his time opened a unique opportunity for recognizing and describing the homoeroticism of the traditional world of the yeshiva. Langer's queer interpretation of Judaism mixed with autobiographical elements is, as Halper suggests, the first known attempt to write a history of homoeroticism in Jewish tradition, which stands "among the earliest cultural articulations of homosexual Jewish consciousness and identity in the historical record" (190). At the same time, as Seidman notes, Langer's exploration of the homoeroticism of traditional Judaism is close to a larger interest in the erotic possibilities of traditional Jewish society in Jewish modernism of his time (*Plot* 276). The categorization of homosexuality in scientific, legal, and popular Western discourses at the turn of the twentieth century has influenced Jewish Ashkenazic society. The early twentieth century witnessed attempts at synthesizing traditional patterns of Jewish religious life with modern homosexual identity in Europe, as is exemplified in Jiří Mordechai Langer's account of Hasidic male homosexual identity in the 1920s-1930s. In his personal life and in his writings, including his homoromantic poetry, Langer engaged with both the Hasidic world and modern homosexual movements.¹⁸² In Langer's representation, Hasidism (or Judaism as a whole) becomes "an incubator of homosexual desire" (Halper 207) in spite of, or precisely because of the discursive invisibility of this desire. According to Langer, "an erotic relationship, which not actualized in the form of intercourse, is what connects Yeshiva students to one another and to their rabbi" (Ilany 139). The

¹⁸² Langer's life and works are a subject of Shaun Jacob Halper's article published in *Jewish Quarterly Review* in 2011. See also Nur on the influence of Blüher's theories on Langer (139).

lack of distinctions between homoeroticism, homosexuality, and heterosexuality allowed specific expressions of homoeroticism through the identification of male same-sex desire with the passion for Torah.¹⁸³

The fourth chapter of Langer's book *The Eroticism of Kabbalah*, "Männerliebe" ("The Love of Men"), includes an autobiographic recollection of homoerotic homosociality in a Hassidic yeshiva of interwar Europe, depicting an erotic energy that permeates the learning process of yeshiva students:

To understand what kind of love [*Liebe*] dwelled between the "yoshvim" [talmudic scholars; literally: "those who sit"], one only has to step into the *beis ha-midrash* (house of study), where they are enveloped with their studies [...]. Here sit two young men (*bachurim*), with beards just beginning to cover their chins, "studying" assiduously over thick Talmud-folios. The one holds the other by his beard, looks deep into his eyes, and in this manner explains a complicated Talmud passage. And there, two friends (*yedidim*) pace around the hall deep in conversation, while embracing one another [...]. (During meals one can see that they always dine out of the same bowl). In the dark corner stand a pair. The younger of the two rests his back against the wall, the elder has the entire frontal part of his body literally pressed against him [...]; they look lovingly in each other's eyes, but keep still. What could be playing out within their pure souls? They themselves don't even know. (Langer 108-109, qtd. in Halper 206-07, with his translation and notes)

¹⁸³ Compare Langer's text with Maskilic criticism of Hasidism, e.g., by Shimshon Bloch in 1817 (qtd. in Sienna 131-36) and Joseph Perl in 1819 (qtd. in Seidman, *Plot* 274-76). See also other accounts of homoeroticism of Hasidic communities (Biale 146; Seidman, *Plot* 18, 90-94).

In Langer's narrative, the affective-romantic and the sexual-erotic bonds between men are inseparable from their intellectual connection and from their engagement with classical Jewish texts: the "love between young Talmudic scholars" is identical with their state of being "enveloped with their studies." The erotic bonds between the yeshiva students are non-phallogentric and non-genital. The manifestations of this love include embracing, affectionate touch (holding the other's nascent beard/chin¹⁸⁴), sexual touch (pressing the bodies against one another in "the dark corners" of the study hall, *beis ha-midrash*), romantic eye contact (looking "deep into the other's eyes"; looking "lovingly in each other's eyes"), and social expressions of emotional attachment (sharing meals, always dining out of the same bowl), which closely resemble the images of prescribed intimacy between study partners in rabbinic literature (cf. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 8.3). These erotic, sexual, and romantic practices shape the very process of studying: they constitute a manner of explaining a complicated Talmud passage or a conversation about the talmudic text.

As Seidman points out, Langer "distinguished the homoerotics of Hasidism from the heteronormativity in which it is usually embedded" (*Plot* 276). In Langer's narrative, the repressive discourse of traditional Judaism generates and proliferates same-sex desire, similar to the ways in which a sexually repressive Victorian society proliferated homosexual desire, as Foucault argues in *History of Sexuality*. As Halper notes, these traditional homosocial Jewish affective relations were not perceived as queerness ("They themselves don't even know"), but they nevertheless allowed one to negotiate what were same-sex desires. It offered a particular erotic pleasure and satisfaction that Langer perceives as having been lost with the disappearance

¹⁸⁴ This image is reminiscent of the typical Athenian depictions of pederastic relationships between mentors-lovers and their students-beloveds.

of this cherished “homoerotic world” (210).¹⁸⁵ The sexual subjectivity that has no language to express itself finds its meaning and shape in the traditional Jewish settings of *havruta* study in the yeshiva.

More recent confessional yeshiva narratives demonstrate a similar depiction of the homoeroticism of yeshiva and *havruta*. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Steven Greenberg, known as the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi in North America, creates a cultural work of articulating Jewish queer identity and subjectivity within traditional and traditionalist frameworks of Judaism that is close to Langer’s writings. In his book *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (2004),¹⁸⁶ Greenberg places his erotic same-sex attractions and his “Orthodox attractions” (4) on a continuum of desire, where same-sex eroticism and Jewish religiosity are interdependent. As Langer did at the turn of the twentieth century, Greenberg, in an account of his student life in the yeshiva a century later, describes how traditional patterns of studying Jewish texts become sites of queer erotic meaning and a central point in the formation of his religious and sexual subjectivity. In Greenberg’s presentation, however, this eroticism of studying is highly ambivalent:

My years in yeshiva, in New York and then in Israel, were spectacular. I was welcomed into a monastic world of sorts, where hundreds of twenty-something men studied and debated in pairs for twelve hours a day. The emotional and intellectual intensity of these young men sequestered away from women was likely fueled by a good deal of sublimated sexual energy. For me the male camaraderie and physical affection, the

¹⁸⁵ See descriptions of similar homoerotic moments in Hassidic life in modern Israel (Michaelson, “Hasidism”).

¹⁸⁶ This narrative in *Wrestling with God and Men* is a revised version of Greenberg’s earlier essay “Gayness and God: Wrestlings of an Orthodox Rabbi,” published in *Tikkun* under the pseudonym Yaakov Levado in 1993, which describes Greenberg’s experience of being a closeted gay Orthodox rabbi.

spiritual passion and intellectual head butting was wonderfully nourishing for many years. But over time, as my sexual repression wore thinner every year, male closeness itself became a strange frustration, and the consciousness of desire bubbling up from inside me became undeniable. (S. Greenberg 6–7)

In this example, the continuum of “male closeness” includes “the camaraderie” and “physical affection,” the “spiritual passion,” the “intellectual head-butting,” and a same-sex sexual desire. For Greenberg, “emotional and intellectual intensity” is inseparable from the “sublimated sexual energy.” Studying and debating in pairs at once generates sexual desire and is fueled by this desire. The very denial and repression of homoeroticism generates and nourishes it. The passionate learning is intertwined with the repressed sexual passion: the homosocial environment is “wonderfully nourishing,” yet it is also a source of frustration. Greenberg’s earlier text highlights this paradox: “For me, the environment deflected sexual energy and generated it as well. The male spirit and energy I felt in yeshiva was both nourishing and frustrating” (Levado 54). The “orthodox attractions” (S. Greenberg 4) that incite the same-sex erotic attractions shape the paradox of the homosocial continuum of traditional Jewish culture from a queer subject position.

4.1.3 “When Torah was Beloved by Israel”: The Lost *Havruta* Love in Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s “Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town”

The novella *Shnei Talmidei Hakhamim Shehayu Be'Irenu* (“Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town”) by Shmuel Yosef Agnon, a famed Israeli writer and the first Nobelist in Hebrew literature, was first published in Hebrew in *Luach Ha'aretz* in 1956. The English translation, by Paul Pinchas Bashan and Rhonna Weber Rogol, only appeared in 2014. The story is set in a nineteenth-century Eastern European shtetl, an unnamed Our Town. The relationship between

two Jewish scholars, Reb Shlomo and Reb Moshe Pinchas, is modelled on the talmudic tale of the relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish (Saks). The narrative represents the intimacy of *havruta* as a lost and praised tradition. Agnon, however, explores the limits of this intimacy and its negative effects on women as well as on the male partners themselves, especially in relation to class and socioeconomic status.

Agnon's novella is set in an unnamed past, "three or four generations ago, when Torah was beloved by Israel and the entire glory of a man was Torah" ("Two Scholars" 3). The lost love of Torah in Agnon's novel is in fact the lost love between study partners. In Agnon's retelling of the rabbinic story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, a close intimate relationship unfolds between the greatest minds of the town, Moshe Pinchas and Reb Shlomo. As the talmudic Resh Lakish, Moshe Pinchas comes from a lower social class: he is a villager, a miller's son (Agnon, "Two Scholars" 4). Reb Shlomo, as the talmudic Rabbi Yohanan, belongs to generations of great rabbis, he is "a son of great scholars, where twenty-six, some even say thirty-six generations or more, were all rabbis and sons of rabbis" (Agnon, "Two Scholars" 8). Reb Shlomo's father and uncle are sages who "embodied Torah in human form" (Agnon, "Two Scholars" 16). Similar to the rabbinic portrayal of Rabbi Yohanan's beauty, Reb Shlomo's extraordinary looks correspond to his scholarly background: "When Reb Shlomo entered the Kloyz, he would light up the whole place with the aura of his presence. The radiance of his face, his blue eyes and his chestnut hair endeared him to all who beheld him" (Agnon, "Two Scholars" 8). As in the rabbinic tale of Rabbi Yohanan's sitting by the women's bathhouse, *mikveh*, in Agnon's story the voice of Reb Moshe Pinchas's studying arouse women's desire to "have sons like him": "The Tailors' synagogue was located above our old study house, opposite the bathhouse. [...] They say that when the women used to go to the mikveh and would hear Reb Moshe Pinchas's voice, they

would bless themselves and say, ‘May we be worthy to have sons like him’” (“Two Scholars” 12). The talmudic story alluded here tells the reader that “Rabbi Yohanan would go and sit at the entrance to the ritual bath. He said: ‘When Jewish women come up from their obligatory immersion, let them meet me, so that they may have sons who are beautiful like me and learned in Torah like me’” (b.Bava Metsia 84a; see my discussion of this talmudic story earlier in this dissertation). Agnon’s story, however, reverses the talmudic *agadah*. The male scholar sitting by a women’s bathhouse is identified with Resh Lakish rather than with Rabbi Yohanan. The voice in the story is the voice of women and not that of the male sage speaking for women. The women are fascinated with Reb Moshe Pinchas’s voice rather than with his looks.

As in the talmudic legend, the relationship between two male scholars in Agnon’s story is charged with erotic and romantic tension. Even after their disagreement, during their intellectual battle, Reb Shlomo shows affection for Reb Pinchas: “and he immediately gazed upon him with great affection¹⁸⁷” (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 18); “and still, Reb Shlomo was gazing upon him warmly” (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 19); “boundless affection from beginning to end” (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 22). Dying Reb Shlomo wishes to be buried next to Reb Moshe Pinchas (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 56). At the funeral, people are chanting the Song of Songs, the biblical love poetry (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 57).

As in the rabbinic tale, the conflict between two male scholars exposes the strength of their connection. The loss of the study partner disrupts the other partner’s scholarship, destroys his happiness, and brings an end to his life. Reb Moshe Pinchas “was consumed by regret [...] He was overcome by sadness and fell into a dark melancholy [...] he has lost the joy of learning”

¹⁸⁷ *Hibah* in the Hebrew original (Agnon, “Shnei” 27).

(Agnon, “Two Scholars” 22). Reb Shlomo “hadn’t allowed himself so much as a taste of anything indulgent” since his separation from Reb Moshe Pinchas (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 50). Reb Shlomo’s eulogy for Reb Moshe Pinchas on the anniversary of his death (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 54–55) is reminiscent of Rabbi Yohanan’s lament after the death of Resh Lakish (b.Bava Metsia 84a) and of David’s lament for Jonathan in 2 Sam. 1.26.

The novella represents the relationship between two Torah scholars as competing with marriage. Reb Shlomo’s wife (who, like the wife of Resh Lakish in the Talmud, remains unnamed), sees Reb Moshe Pinchas as a “man coming between her and her husband” (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 8). Reb Shlomo’s wife “resented Reb Moshe Pinchas,” but “because of the story of Michal and David (Samuel II 6:16)¹⁸⁸ she didn’t say a word about it” (Agnon, “Two Scholars” 8). The biblical text claims that Michal had no children because she reprimanded David for what she perceived as indecency (2 Sam. 6.16-23).¹⁸⁹ Apparently, Reb Shlomo’s wife refrains from expressing her concerns to Reb Shlomo because of her fear of a similar punishment. The reference to the biblical story of Michal and David, however, has an additional layer: it indirectly points to the relationships between Reb Shlomo’s wife, Reb Shlomo, and Reb Moshe Pinchas as a love triangle, similar to that of Michal, David, and Jonathan in the Hebrew Bible or that of Resh Lakish’s wife, Resh Lakish, and Rabbi Yohanan in the Talmud. The alluded theme of indecency also suggests an erotic subtext of Reb Shlomo’s and Reb Moshe Pinchas’s study partnership. Agnon also addresses the negative effects of the traditional Torah scholarship on women through the complaints of Moshe Pinchas’s wife Shaindel abandoned by her husband who spends all his time in the study house: “A house in which the head of the household is not

¹⁸⁸ The translator’s citation style.

¹⁸⁹ In the patriarchal context of this biblical text, being childless is a divine punishment upon a woman for what is perceived as showing disrespect to the husband. This, however, allows a queer reading from a modern perspective if understood as Michal’s choice. See Lee Edelman on not having children is a sign of the queer (*No Future*).

found, is not likely to have guests found in it. God forbid that I should say anything against Moshe Pinchas, who doesn't move from the study house. And where else would he sit? In this garbage heap? But this much I'll tell you, Mother, my strength has ebbed and I don't know why the Angel of Death tarries and doesn't just come and take me from this world. It would better for him to kill me a thousand times a day" ("Two Scholars" 28). As in the talmudic tales about abandoned wives, Reb Shlomo's and Reb Moshe Pinchas's love for Torah or for each other excludes their wives and stands in competition with traditional marriage in disturbingly misogynistic ways.

4.1.4 "Never to Part Again": *Havruta* as Marriage Drag in Isaac Bashevis Singer's Queer Stories

Isaac Bashevis Singer, an American Jewish writer who became the first Nobelist in Yiddish literature, wrote several queer stories between 1963-1986. In these stories, the traditional normative homoeroticism of *havruta* turns it into a transgressive practice that becomes explicitly queer. Singer's stories disrupt the notion of heteromale traditional Jewish scholarship and the male homosociality of the *havruta* by complicating gender and sexual identities of his characters. Warren Hoffman points out that in these stories, Singer appropriates and resignifies traditional Jewish discourses of gender and sexuality, as well as the images of the Eastern European shtetl (small town), for a discussion of the modern gay identity in the United States in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, and its relation to contemporary Jewish culture (125–26, 131). Hoffman notes the conflation of queer sexuality with gender ambiguity in Singer's "androgynous tales" (124), which serves to disrupt modern identity categories: "Almost all of these stories engage with homosexuality via the sites of androgyny and, in some cases, transvestitism," through categories that do not correspond to modern gender and sexual identities (128). "This move

enables homosexual relationships to develop” (Hoffman 128) more in line with rabbinic categories that provide an alternative approach to the standard Western binary categories of gender and sexuality. Hoffman points out that “Yiddish and the rabbinic concept of gender androgyny provides Singer with a system of engaging the topic of homosexuality in ways that the English language could only begin to imagine” (145).¹⁹⁰

In Singer’s narratives, Torah study generates and necessarily frames erotic, romantic, and sexual connections. The romantic and sexual relationships in these stories stem from *havruta*. Shared Torah study informs the love and intimacy between Yentl and Avigdor (and, to some extent, between Yentl and Hadass) in “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy”; between Zeitl and Rickel in the story of the same title; between Shevach and Reb Motele in “Androgynous”; between Zissel and Ezriel and between Zissel and Reizl in “Two”; and between Pinchosl and Elkonah in “Disguised.” The queer relationships in some of these stories involve study partners in a yeshiva, when both partners are assumed to be male (Anshel and Avigdor in “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy”; Zissel and Ezriel in “Two”; and Pinchosl and Elkonah in “Disguised”). In contrast to other literary depictions of the homoeroticism of traditional Torah study, reserved to a male homosocial environment, Singer’s stories also represent studying Jewish texts as enabling or constructing same-sex intimacies between females (Yentl and Hadass or Zeitl and Rickel) or between partners whose gender is uncertain or complicated (Anshel-Yentl in “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy”; Shevach in “Androgynous”; Zissel in “Two”; and Pinchosl in “Disguised”). As Singer’s stories demonstrate, queer *havruta* may be accessible to men, women, trans and non-binary people. In “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,” Yentl, a female, chooses to live as a man. In “Androgynous,” Shevach, a person of uncertain biological sex, switches woman’s and man’s

¹⁹⁰ See also Shandler’s observations of “postvernacular” usages of the Yiddish language in queer culture.

identities multiple times, depending on the expected social role (such as a rabbi's wife or a rabbi), while never fully identified with either one. Zeitl and Rickel are women who form an intimate *havruta* and a marriage-like union without ever assuming masculine roles or identities. Male Zissel in "Two" and male Pinchosl in "Disguised" choose to live as women, while their male study partners and lovers (Ezriel in "Two" and Elkonah in "Disguised") maintain their men's identities.

4.1.5 Female Masculinity in "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy"

"Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" is the most known of these stories largely because of Barbara Streisand's film *Yentl* (1983). Singer wrote his short story in the 1950s in Yiddish ("Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur," published in 1963) and in English ("Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," published in 1964).¹⁹¹ "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" was adapted for the stage by Singer himself and Leah Napolin in 1974. The play premiered in 1975 in New York on Broadway. Singer criticized Streisand's film, produced almost a decade later, for failing to portray "the scholarly Yentl" with "the soul of a man and the body of a woman" ("I.B. Singer"). Using today's language, Singer objected Streisand's turning of his queer story into a heteronormative and cisnormative Hollywood romance.¹⁹² In her recent memoir, Streisand, in her turn, criticizes Singer's story as misogynistic and defends her effort to reclaim Yentl from a feminist perspective to tell a story about gender equality (512, 579): "Just because she was smart and wanted to study didn't mean she had the soul of a man. That struck me as a bit misogynistic" (518). This Singer-Streisand controversy

¹⁹¹ The English translation used in this dissertation is by Marion Magid and Elizabeth Pollet, published in 2004. In the quotations directly from the Yiddish original, the translation is mine.

¹⁹² See also Singer's understanding of the image of Yentl as "homosexual," in contrast to the accepted view of this character as transgender in scholarship, in Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Conversations*, ed. Grace Farrell (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 80. A new stage adaptation of Singer's story from the original Yiddish written by Gary Abrahams, Elise Hearst and Galit Klaas and directed by Gary Abrahams in Melbourne in 2022 foregrounds the queer content and the Jewish folk mysticism of the story.

highlights the complexity of Yentl's character and, by extension, of her love relationships within the context of Torah study in the yeshiva. Does Yentl's gender and sexual ambiguity reinforce the androcentric, misogynistic, and heteronormative structures of the traditional Jewish intellectual life or does it disrupt and reclaim these structures in a new context? My answer would be "yes" to both questions.

"Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," set in nineteenth-century Poland, tells the story of Yentl, a rabbi's daughter, who defies traditional gender roles by disguising herself as a man, Anshel, to pursue her passion for Torah study. After her father's death, Yentl relocates from her hometown Yanév to another shtetl, Bechev, and adopts a male identity to study in the yeshiva.¹⁹³ Yentl-Anshel's dual gender performance (female for the reader and male for the story characters) reveals the narrative's inherent tension between normative structures and queer realities. Yentl subverts the heteronormative and patriarchal structures through her male persona, which she adopts to engage in the intellectual pursuits traditionally reserved for men. Singer's work simultaneously affirms and disrupts the conventional roles and expectations, as Yentl resists the prescribed gender roles and the institution of marriage as a woman, while embracing them as a man.

Torah study in the yeshiva is the primary goal and the cause of Yentl's transgressive gender and sexual trajectories: "she had taken all these burdens upon herself because her soul thirsted to study Torah" ("Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 452). Yentl subverts the traditional rhetoric of devotion to the Torah. "All these burdens" are highly transgressive, yet Yentl's queer desires (and queer

¹⁹³ Singer might have modeled the character of Yentl after the figure of the Maid of Ludmir, a nineteenth-century female Hasidic rebbe, who assumed the traditionally masculine role of a religious leader, presented herself in conventionally masculine terms, and attracted a significant number of followers (see Alpert, *Bread*, 134-138). The Maid of Ludmir's rabbinical status in the Hasidic community was only possible when she was single and presumably celibate. After marriage, she had to assume the traditional woman's role. Cf. the character of Shevach in Singer's story "Androgynous" that I discuss later in this chapter.

gender) are predicated on her passion for Torah study. The first object of Yentl's desire is Torah and knowledge. Yentl realizes that desire in a way that is performatively, increasingly queer. Yentl's queer sexualities start manifesting only in the context of Torah study in the yeshiva. As in Langer's and Greenberg's autobiographical writings, the yeshiva produces queer desires. When Yentl dresses in men's clothes and assumes a male's name, Anshel, Yentl's drag, along with Yentl's larger gender ambiguity, builds upon and disrupts the male homosocial environment of the yeshiva. The perspective of a gender and sexual nonconformist Jewish female in this story allows for revelation of a number of aspects of male homosociality in the traditional yeshiva, including its effects on women and its relation to female and male queer erotics.

As a yeshiva student, assumed to be male, Yentl forms two intimate relationships: with her male study partner Avigdor and with her hostess turned wife Hadass. Yentl's femaleness affirms the heteronormativity of traditional Jewish culture, while Anshel's male drag or, rather, Yentl-Anshel's gender ambiguity, allows to explore same-sex desire in this context. Not only Yentl passes as a man and is perceived as such by others, but Yentl also identifies as a man at times and as a woman at other times. Avigdor falls in love with Anshel, assumed to be male. Yentl falls in love with Avigdor because Yentl is female, but also because Yentl is Anshel, a man. In a similar yet reverse way, Yentl-Anshel marries female Hadass as a man Anshel and as a woman Yentl at once. Both viewpoints are always present in the narrative to the reader, who is constantly reminded by the author of this double dynamic, heteronormative and queer at once. The tension between the normative and the queer is built into the narrative structure to allow both things to be true (and ultimately socially acceptable at the time the short story is published in the early 1960s).

The theme of traditional matchmaking in “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” performs a double function: it signifies Yentl’s refusal of the (hetero)normative, patriarchal family and a new construction of a queer family. In the beginning of the story, Yentl, as a young woman, rejects the offers of matchmakers: “the marriage brokers flocked to her door with offers from Lublin, Tomashev, Zamosc. But Yentl didn’t want to get married” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 439). Later, however, as the man Anshel, Yentl serves as her own matchmaker and arranges her marriage with Hadass (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 447–49). In both instances, Singer represents matchmaking in relation to the yeshiva. Yentl’s desire for studying in the yeshiva serves as the reason for rejecting a prospective match, along with the very idea of marriage and associated with it gender roles. The yeshiva also serves as the context for entering into a marriage with another woman, Hadass, who, in her turn, is attracted to a bright yeshiva student. As a woman, Yentl chooses yeshiva over marriage. Yeshiva here functions as an alternative to marriage. As a man, however, Anshel marries Hadass. In this case, yeshiva engenders and necessitates marriage.

In “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,” the classical Jewish texts construct queer sexual pleasures. Yentl-Anshel learns about sex from the Talmud: “To be sure, Anshel too was a virgin but she knew a lot about such matters from the Gemara¹⁹⁴ and from hearing men talk” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 448). Both of Yentl’s love relationships, with male Avigdor and with female Hadass, are based on studying and sharing the knowledge of the classical Jewish religious texts. These relationships are in many ways analogous, queer and normative at once. With Avigdor, it is a romantic-erotic relationship between yeshiva students, *havruta* partners, between two self-

¹⁹⁴ The term “Gemara,” which refers to the core of the Talmud (the Amoraic discussions of the Mishnah) is often used as a synonym for the “Talmud” in the yeshiva language.

identified men, one with a male body (Avigdor) and one with a female body (Yentl). With Hadass, it appears as a traditional Jewish marriage of a man, a yeshiva student, and a woman, the daughter of that student's hosts, yet the man's body is female. Both are same-sex and trans relationships disguised as, and produced by, the heteronormative structures of traditional Jewish life. The union of Anshel and Hadass performs almost all the relational markers, affects, and duties of a traditional marriage, as long as it can.

In the context of the story, the intense intimate relationship that unfolds between the two study partners, *shutfim* ("Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur" 136, 142), Avigdor and Anshel, is only possible within the homosocial erotic ambiguity of the yeshiva. As Seidman notes, "Yentl's attraction to Avigdor can hardly be separated from her longing to study Talmud with him" (*Plot* 291). Seidman points out that "the 'democratic,' aggressive intimacy native to Talmudic argument, and foreign to the 'civilized' choreography of bourgeois gender performance" allows Singer (and later Streisand in her film based on Singer's story) to imagine ways "to participate in pleasures unavailable elsewhere in modern life" (*Plot* 292). Yentl's "impossible, multiple, transgressive, traditional desires" (Seidman, *Plot* 292) are transgressive and traditional at once, and this makes them impossible in both traditional and modern worlds. The images of *havruta* study in Singer's story are in many ways close to other literary representations of the homoeroticism of traditional study partnership:

Gradually the two went back to their Talmudic conversation. It seemed strange at first to Avigdor to be disputing holy writ with a woman, yet before long the Torah had reunited them. Though their bodies were different, their souls were of one kind. Anshel spoke in a

singsong,¹⁹⁵ gesticulated with her thumb, clutched her sidelocks, plucked at her beardless chin, made all the customary gestures of a yeshiva student. In the heat of argument she even seized Avigdor by the lapel and called him stupid. A great love of Anshel took hold of Avigdor, mixed with shame, remorse, anxiety. (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 458)

In the Yiddish original the pronouns referring to Anshel are masculine, which makes the homoeroticism of this episode more explicit. The English translation that substitutes them with feminine pronouns heteronormalizes and simplifies the text, erasing the queerness of the text along with its ambiguity and complexity.¹⁹⁶ Hoffman notes the intended ambivalence of Singer’s short story in Yiddish and the fact that Anshel, rather than Yentl, becomes the primary object of Avigdor’s desire: “He [Avigdor] would long for Anshel (or Yentl)” (“*Er vet oysgeyn fun benkschaft nokh ansheln (oder yentlen)*”) (Hoffman 137–38). This homoerotic subtext is lost in the English translation that substitutes “Yentl” for “Anshel (or Yentl).”

The very process of studying the texts in *havruta*, the “customary gestures of a yeshiva student,” can allow “for physical intimacies of the most passionate sort” (Seidman, *Plot* 292) between men. Within the gender-erotic ambiguity of the story, it is precisely this *havruta* intimacy that sparks Avigdor’s “great love for Anshel,” because and despite Yentl’s femaleness as well as because and despite Anshel’s masculinity. It is also the text that establishes and mediates an intimate connection (“the Torah reunited them”). The intellectual interaction around reading and interpreting the text (“the heat of argument”) enables physical and emotional

¹⁹⁵ The Yiddish original uses a phrase “talmudic tune” (*gemora nigun*), emphasizing the image of Anshel as a yeshiva student (*yeshiva bokhur*). This important connotation is lost in the English translation (“singsong”).

¹⁹⁶ Cf. the scene of Anshel flirting with Avigdor: “She picked up a chestnut and threw it at Avigdor” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 444). The homosocial homoeroticism is more evident in the Yiddish original that uses a masculine pronoun *er* (“he”) when referring to Anshel in this episode: *Er hot oyfgehoybn a kashtan un geforfn Avigdorn* (Singer, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur” 137–38).

closeness, and passionate expressions of affection. The love between Anshel and Avigdor is closely linked to their shared Torah study in *havruta* and to their “sharing a lectern in a corner of the study house”: “The two friends, sharing a lectern in a corner of the study house, spent more time talking than learning. [...] Avigdor grew more and more attached to this boy, five years younger than himself, whose beard hadn’t even begun to sprout” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 459). Anshel-Yentl’s drag reveals and affirms the homoerotic power of the traditional *havruta*. At the same time, it disrupts the traditional male homosociality and its traditional heteronormativity. Is Yentl’s attraction to Avigdor part of her attraction to studying? Is Avigdor attracted to Anshel’s traditional image of Jewish scholarly masculinity? Or is he attracted to the female body of Yentl? Or is he drawn to the very gender ambiguity that his study partner poses to him?

The biblical symbolism of David and Jonathan affirms, or perhaps produces, the social approval of Avigdor’s and Anshel’s romantic connection as *havruta* partners:

Now that he was married, Avigdor’s desire to study was greater than ever, and the friends met twice each day: in the mornings they studied the Gemara and the Commentaries, in the afternoons the Legal Codes with their glosses. Alter Vishkower and Feitl the Leatherdealer were pleased and compared Avigdor and Anshel to David and Jonathan. (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 452)

The love of David and Jonathan here is connected to the love of Torah, “desire to study,” *heshek tzu lernen* (Singer, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur” 148), which also signifies the desire of the partners for one another. Hoffman notes that the comparison of Anshel and Avigdor to Jonathan and David, with an immediate connection of the images of David and Jonathan to *havruta* intimacy and shared scholarship, “further positions them as gay men, imbuing their

relationship with the overtones of this historically homoerotic relationship” (137). The trope of David and Jonathan also, in an ironic manner, affirms the parallels between the non-sexual *havruta* intimacy and marriage. The recognition of this intimacy comes from Avigdor’s father and father-in-law, Alter Vishkower and Feitl the Leatherdealer. Avigdor’s and Anshel’s relationship pleases both fathers as if it were a marriage.

The image of a study partner as a soulmate, an exclusive, predestined match is grounded in the intellectual, romantic, and erotic connection between study partners. Anshel cannot choose another study partner when Avigdor stops attending the yeshiva: “there was no one in the yeshiva who could take Avigdor’s place,” because “all the others were small, in body and in spirit” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 446). Anshel cannot study without Avigdor, realizing that nobody can replace him as a *havruta* partner. The reader soon realizes that Avigdor’s irreplaceability is also rooted in Anshel’s romantic and physical attraction to him. This marriage-like attachment is both physical and intellectual (“in body and spirit”).

A romantic commitment is closely related to the concepts of marriage and study partnership at once, with the emphasis on staying together as a couple: as the biblical David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18.3; 20.16, 23, 42; and 23.18), Anshel and Avigdor make an oath that expresses their mutual commitment: “the two pledged their friendship and promised never again to part” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 451) in a fantasy of a marriage-like romantic arrangement. Anshel and Avigdor imagine that “after they were both married, they should live next door or even share the same house. They would study together every day” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 451). The notion of togetherness, of some sort of shared life and domestic partnership (living next door or sharing the same house) is central to Anshel’s and Avigdor’s mutual commitment. The images of marriage and family here are arranged as a traditional study

partnership: the perceived goal of this marriage-like arrangement is to “study together every day.” Remarkably, this arrangement is modelled on conventional heteronormative marriage to provide the structure and the space for the homoerotic relationship: this fantasy can only be realized “after they are both married” to their respective future brides. The literal heteronormative marriage of the yeshiva students helps to actualize the symbolic marital character of their *havruta*. The promise “never again to part” proves unattainable, however, because Anshel leaves Avigdor and the town at the end of the story.

The queer nature of Anshel’s and Avigdor’s relationship is amplified during a scene of Yentl-Anshel’s undressing. Yentl comes out to Avigdor as a female and reveals her body to him as a proof. The only thing this act demonstrates, however, is the multilayered transgressiveness of their bond. The act of undressing, including removing the *tzitzit*, a Jewish men’s ritual undergarment, signifies a (failed) act of essentializing gender identities and sexual expectations. The traditional homoerotic connection between men is predicated on the heteronormativity of the yeshiva homosociality. The Levitical rhetoric of male-male intercourse (*mishkav zakhur*) disrupts the unquestioned romantic and erotic connection between the yeshiva boy Anshel and his male study partner Avigdor.

“I’m not a man but a woman,” said Anshel. “My name isn’t Anshel, it’s Yentl.”

Avigdor burst out laughing.

“I knew it was a hoax.”

“But it’s true.”

“Even if I’m a fool, I won’t swallow this.”

“Do you want me to show you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll get undressed.”

Avigdor’s eyes widened. It occurred to him that Anshel might want to practice pederasty. (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 456)

The Yiddish original uses the rabbinic term for male-male intercourse, *mishkav zakhur*, or, in its Yiddish form, *mishkev-zokher* (Singer, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur” 154), which the English translation renders as “pederasty,” significantly changing the connotations of the term. The Levitical discourse of *mishkev zokher* introduces the sexual component associated with the horror (and perhaps excitement) of forbidden practices. Was Avigdor ready to protest this possibility or to welcome it, or both? Does this episode show Avigdor’s anticipation of *mishkev zokher* or his fear of what might happen? The reader cannot know Avigdor’s response to the thought of possible practicing *mishkev zokher* with Anshel because the next moment Avigdor sees the naked female body of Yentl, and thus the conversation shifts into the traditional discourses of forbidden male-female sexual relationships, with their own themes of fear and shame. This anticipates Avigdor’s inner struggle later in the story, when he is already aware that his study partner is a woman: “A great love of Anshel took hold of Avigdor, mixed with shame, remorse, anxiety” (Singer, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur” 458). Note the homoerotic overtones in this supposedly heteronormative situation: Avigdor is in love with “Anshel,” rather than “Yentl” even after Yentl’s femaleness is revealed to him.

The image of *tzitzit* plays a role of performative masculinity in this imagined sexual act. Anshel’s undressing is meant to prove to Avigdor that his study partner is “not a man but a

woman”: “Anshel took off the gaberdine and the fringed garment, and threw off her underclothes” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 456). The act of removing the *tzitzit*, “the fringed garment,” along with throwing off the underwear, which resembles a strip show, appears to be less about the “truth” of one’s biological sex or gender identity and more about a sexual play, an erotic performance between two *havruta* partners. Anshel gets undressed at Avigdor’s request: “Do you want me to show you?” “Yes.” “Then I’ll get undressed” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 456). The sexual meaning of this scene is reinforced by Avigdor’s sexual expectations, by his anticipation of *mishkev zokher*, a male-male intercourse. Avigdor himself never protests this possibility. The homoerotic energy between Anshel and Avigdor before this revelation was already so habitual and so intense that both “might want to practice pederasty” at any given point.

The scene of undressing is immediately preceded by the traditional, normative image of *havruta* intimacy similar to the one outlined in Avot de Rabbi Nathan: “The companions, chatting, ate the fruit and little cakes that Hadass had packed, told each other jokes, and exchanged confidences until they reached Lublin. There they went to an inn and took a room for two” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 455). This image of companionship, which includes eating and sleeping together and exchanging confidences, at once resembles the normative homosocial *havruta* intimacy (Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3) and the relationship of a married couple (the images of eating homemade cakes and booking a room for two in a hotel). The theme of queer marriage is reinforced by the image of Hadass as a participant of this love triangle. The marriage-like normative *havruta* intimacy presupposes the flow of homoerotic desire. This intimacy generates the expectation of erotic or sexual interactions between study partners,

eroticizing and sexualizing the religious objects involved in these interactions, especially the objects associated with the body.

The interaction between Anshel and Avigdor retains its queer character even during and after Avigdor sees Yentl's female body, which is more evident in the Yiddish original. The English translation refers to Anshel here by feminine pronouns ("her," "herself"): "Anshel took off the gaberdine and the fringed garment, and threw off her underclothes" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 456); "Anshel covered herself hastily" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 456). In the Yiddish original, however, throughout this entire episode, including the moments of undressing and nudity, Anshel is referred to using the male pronoun, *er*, "he" (Singer, "Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur" 154). With the revealed female body, Yentl remains a man, Anshel, to Avigdor and to the reader. This explains Avigdor's statement after seeing Yentl's naked body: "I don't believe it" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 456). The act of undressing is supposed to reveal the female body of Avigdor's presumably male study partner and thus to present a biological proof of the truth-falsehood of Yentl's gender identity. By removing the *tzitzit*, "the fringed garment," Yentl also symbolically removes her masculinity, her male identity. This act, however, proves or changes very little. The act of removing clothes, including the traditional markers of masculinity such as *tzitzit*, ritual undergarment, and revealing the female body fails to perform its intended function of gender affirmation. Avigdor still sees his study partner as a man, although with a female body. This is more evident when Avigdor continues his studies with Anshel as usual, even though now their *havruta* becomes a transgressive practice on its own. Yentl's coming out to Avigdor as female while retaining the masculine drag performance charges the situation with ambiguity: "According to the Law Avigdor was now forbidden to spend another moment alone with Yentl; yet dressed in the gabardine and trousers, she was again the familiar Anshel. They

resumed their conversation on the old footing” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 457). When Anshel and Avigdor “went back to their Talmudic conversation,” “in the manner of a scholar” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 458), the Yiddish text again refers to Anshel exclusively in masculine terms, for example, *er hot gedreyt mit a finger*, “he gesticulated with a thumb,” *er hot afilu*, “he is even” (Singer, “Yentl der Yeshive-Bokhur” 157–58), which queers Avigdor’s feelings for Anshel (“A great love of Anshel took hold of Avigdor”): Avigdor is in love with Anshel, rather than with Yentl. The English translation here again inserts feminine pronouns (“her,” “she”), which are absent in the original, or changes the original masculine pronouns (*er*, “he”) into feminine (“she”). By doing so the English translation attempts to “straighten” the logic of the story and the desire of the characters, turning this homoerotic episode into a heteronormative one¹⁹⁷: “Anshel spoke in a singsong, gesticulated with her thumb, clutched her sidelocks, plucked at her beardless chin, made all the customary gestures of a yeshiva student. In the heat of argument she even seized Avigdor by the lapel and called him stupid. A great love of Anshel took hold of Avigdor, mixed with shame, remorse, anxiety” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 458).

Singer’s short story disrupts the naturalness of gender and normativity of desire, revealing both as socially constructed: they are predicated upon the choice of clothes. Is the truth what one sees or is it what one knows? The Law forbids Avigdor to spend time with Yentl, but not with Anshel. The gender ambiguity of Avigdor’s study partner helps maintain and intensify the romantic attachments, erotic desires, and sexual possibilities.

¹⁹⁷ See Hoffman’s comment that the translators erased the possibility of a homoerotic subtext by substituting Yentl for Anshel, whereas in the Yiddish original Anshel is the primary object of Avigdor’s desire (137–38).

Anshel and Avigdor, two study partners in the yeshiva, play with both hetero- and homosexual possibilities of marriage at once: “‘If I were a woman and married to you,’ said Anshel, ‘I’d know how to appreciate you.’ ‘Well, but you aren’t...’ Avigdor sighed” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 452–53). Anshel’s silence in response to Avigdor is ambivalent: Anshel-Yentl is a woman and not a woman at once, not yet ready to reveal this fact to Avigdor. Both study partners entertain the idea of their marriage, each from their own epistemological perspective: Avigdor, based on his assumption of Anshel’s maleness; and Anshel, based on his/her knowledge of his/her own gender ambiguity. Later in the story Singer reverses this situation: having revealed her biological sex to Avigdor, Yentl refuses to marry him. “‘You could have married me,’ Avigdor said” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 459). Yentl, however, responds, “I wanted to study the Gemara and Commentaries with you, not darn your socks!” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 459). Yentl resists the prescribed gender roles and the image of femininity relegated to domestic tasks: she is not willing to perform the role of the wife whose life is restricted to taking care of the household (to “darn your socks”). From the very beginning, “Yentl didn’t want to get married” because “Yentl knew she wasn’t cut out for a woman’s life,” which was restricted to “bearing and rearing” and baking challahs and Sabbath puddings (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 439). Yentl is longing for an intellectual connection (“I wanted to study the Gemara and Commentaries with you”) that in traditional Jewish society is associated with masculinity. Yentl’s performance of masculinity, however, is more than merely a refusal to conform to gender stereotypes or a choice of one gender stereotype over the other. Anshel is not merely Yentl’s drag, but an identity. Yentl’s refusal to become Avigdor’s wife parallels Anshel’s longing to marry Avigdor, to realize the queer relationship between *havruta* partners. Yentl chooses to remain Anshel and not to enter a heteronormative marriage to a man as a woman

would. Not only would such a marriage deny Yentl access to intellectual pursuits, but it would also require suppressing Anshel's masculine identity and erasing the fundamental queerness of Anshel's relationship with Avigdor. Yentl resists normalizing their love and transferring it to the normative context of heterosexual marriage: "Maybe it's still not too late?" "No, Avigdor, it's impossible." "Why?" "I'll live out my time as I am..." (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 459). A heteronormative marriage is incompatible with Yentl's identity ("I'll live out my time as I am..."). Refusing to marry Avigdor may mean Yentl's sacrificing her own love of Avigdor for the sake of Avigdor's and Hadass' happiness. It may also mean Anshel's staying true to his identity as a man or a non-binary person. As well, it may signal the sexual ambiguity of the relationship between two study partners and the impossibility of their desires. Yentl cannot marry Avigdor because, in a way, they are already married through their *havruta*.

Yentl rejects the idea of performing the conventional wife's role. Anshel, "the yeshiva boy," yearns to marry another yeshiva boy, his study partner Avigdor. Yentl, as a woman, refuses heterosexual marriage, whether it is a traditional arranged marriage or even marrying her love object, Avigdor. At the same time, Yentl, as the man Anshel, envisions a marriage-like relationship with Avigdor, a love relationship between two men, two yeshiva students, which stemmed out of their shared Torah study in *havruta*. As the man Anshel, Yentl also welcomes a possibility of marrying Hadass, her female host (in contrast to Yentl's rejection of Avigdor's marriage proposal)—a possibility produced by Anshel's role as a yeshiva student. Yentl consistently chooses yeshiva over marriage and queer marriage over heteronormative marriage. Were Yentl to come out as a woman, she would be excluded from the world of Torah study. Yentl's refusal of heterosexual marriage in her rejection of Avigdor's proposal also suggests that

their *havruta* is already a form of marriage, the one that has a value on its own and that excludes a possibility of a heteronormative marriage.

Yentl's relationship with her bride Hadass, a female-female intimacy, in many ways resembles *havruta*. As a woman conforming to her conventional feminine role Hadass is denied access to the yeshiva and to the Talmud. Sexual intimacy between Yentl and Hadass becomes a form of sharing knowledge of the rabbinic sexual discourses that Yentl, passing as male Anshel, had learned in the *havruta* with Avigdor. The sexual interaction between Yentl and Hadass during their marriage is a form of experiential learning. Yentl's talmudic studies help her find a way to "deflower" Hadass (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 453). The heteronormative rabbinic texts thus serve as queer *ars erotica*, a manual for sexual relations between two females, with one of the partners passing as a man. To employ Michel Foucault's observation, the repressive discourse generates the very possibilities that it seems to restrict.

In turn, Yentl's Talmud study with Avigdor includes sharing the details of Yentl's sexual experience with Hadass: "The next day Anshel and Avigdor took up the study of the Tractate on Menstruating Women. When the other men had departed and the two were left to themselves in the synagogue, Avigdor shyly questioned Anshel about his night with Hadass. Anshel gratified his curiosity and they whispered together until nightfall" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 453–54). Anshel's and Avigdor's discussion of sex as part of their shared Talmud study in *havruta* (they are studying the Tractate on Menstruating Women, which focuses on the rabbinic laws regarding sexual relations) turns into a discussion of the actual sexual experience that becomes part of their shared Talmud study as well. By sharing with Avigdor the details of her/his sexual experience with Hadass, Yentl-Anshel allows Avigdor to participate in that experience, as the third partner of the transgressive love triangle. This act of sharing the most personal and private

experiences is at the same time in line with the normative intimacy between *havruta* partners, echoing the rabbinic requirement that one reveals to his study partner “all his secrets, the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of worldly things” (Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3).

These mirroring episodes draw parallels between Yentl’s relationships with Avigdor and with Hadass, which often serve as mutual reversals. They also draw parallels between Torah study and sex, on the one hand, and between various arrangements of gender and intimacy, on the other hand. Yentl-Anshel’s intellectual-emotional intimacy with Avigdor in a perceived male-male yet actual female-male relationship correlates with Yentl-Anshel’s sexual intimacy with Hadass in a perceived male-female yet actual female-female relationship. Both relationships are in some ways predicated upon each other.

The marriage of Anshel and Hadass is normative and subversive at once: “As often happens with such ill-advised matches, everyone was strongly in favor of it – the rabbi, the relatives, Hadass’ girl friends” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 449). The queer match meets society’s approval because it seems to conform to the ideal of the traditional heteronormative marriage between a bright yeshiva student and the daughter of “the richest man in town” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 441), arranged by the bride’s parents. In reality, it is a wedding between two females. Anshel’s marriage to Hadass completes Anshel’s image of a yeshiva student, who, due to his Torah knowledge, would be expected to marry, through matchmaking, a beautiful daughter of a wealthy man and in this way to affirm the cultural value of Torah scholarship in the traditional Jewish community, a match between the spiritual and the physical. Yentl, however, disrupts this image. The relationship of Anshel and Hadass is simultaneously normative and transgressive. The partners are united through a traditional Jewish marriage, arranged by the bride’s parents, who presume that the groom is a male, as does the bride. Yet it is a sexual and

romantic relationship between two females, a relationship that is not recognized in traditional Jewish law and society.

In “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,” Yentl attempts to achieve a greater intimacy with Avigdor through marrying Hadass. In Yentl’s mind, marrying Hadass, Avigdor’s love object, would bring her closer to Avigdor (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 448, 459).¹⁹⁸ This notion suggests an indirect way to affirm their commitment to each other and to signal the romantic nature of their relationship through a normative marriage to a third party. This motif resembles the traffic in women in traditional marriages, where the woman served as an object of economic transaction or romantic bonds between two men (Rubin), which was also represented in Western literature (Sedgwick, *Between*).¹⁹⁹ This is precisely how Yentl’s society wants to see this marriage: at the end of the story, when Yentl leaves the shtetl and Avigdor marries Hadass, “Peshe spread the rumor that Anshel had sold his wife to Avigdor for a price, and that the money had been supplied by Alter Vishkower.” The rumors go on claiming that “Anshel lost his beloved wife to Avigdor at cards, or even on a spin of the Chanukah *dreidl*” (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 462–63). Remarkably, the person who generates these ideas of traffic in women is Peshe, Avigdor’s first wife, who represents a heteronormative alternative to Avigdor’s and Yentl’s queer relationship. This ending brings the reader back to reality, to the heteronormative family with its expected exchange of women—the latter is exaggerated to the level of grotesque, yet it appears too real in the absence of Yentl, the queer disturber of the norms.

¹⁹⁸ As well, by playing a joke on Hadass’ family Yentl intends to “exact vengeance” on them as a punishment for their rejection of Avigdor (Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” 448).

¹⁹⁹ Sedgwick writes about “the compulsory involvement of women in all the male homosocial bonds” in erotic triangles of English novel (*Between* 66).

In Singer's variation on the theme of exchange of women, Anshel marries the object of Avigdor's love and by doing so hopes to get closer to Avigdor through his loved one. The image of Hadass creates a love triangle. It also establishes multiple parallels between *havruta* and marriage, through the connections between Anshel's and Avigdor's *havruta* and Anshel's and Hadass's marriage (e.g., Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 455). The role of Hadass is more than instrumental. The relationship between Yentl, Avigdor, and Hadass is a love triangle. Each of the three partners is romantically and erotically involved with the other two. Hadass is a willing participant. She is in love with both Anshel (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 453) and Avigdor (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 460). Anshel, too, is genuinely attracted to Hadass as much as to Avigdor (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 445). This is another reason (perhaps, the major one) for Anshel's marriage to Hadass. Anshel's erotic gaze is directed at Hadass and at Avigdor, subverting and reinforcing the conventional male heterosexual gaze. In each instance, Anshel's gaze is at once homoerotic and heteroerotic: whether the object of the erotic gaze is a female (Hadass) or a male (Avigdor), the subject of the erotic gaze is a female (Yentl) who is also a man (Anshel). Anshel is well aware of his/her sexual desire for Hadass: "a pity I'm not a man" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 445); "I, too, want you" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 447). In his turn, Avigdor wants Anshel to marry Hadass as a way of affirming the intimacy between the three of them: "better you than a total stranger" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 443). The motif of shared intimacy within the love triangle when Anshel and Avigdor discuss Anshel's "night with Hadass" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 453–54) evokes the rabbinic requirement of intimacy between *havruta* partners in Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3, "to reveal to him all his secrets, the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of worldly things." In this love triangle, where *havruta* is an essential element, the two study partners, who are in love with each

other, “share secrets” about their sex lives as a way of intimacy between themselves and between their shared love objects.

4.1.6 Women’s *Havruta* in “Zeitl and Rickel”

Shortly after publishing “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,” Singer wrote a short story “Zeitl and Rickel,” published in Yiddish (“Tseytl un Rikl”) in 1966 (translated into English in 1968). “Zeitl and Rickel” describes intimate bonds between two young Jewish women who form a study pair of their own as a framework of their love relationship. Living together in the home of Zeitl’s late father, a scholar, Zeitl and Rickel perform a relationship of a married couple and a *havruta* at once. Their relationship, although approved by the local rabbi, arouses rumors spread by the town gossipers, which eventually drive the two women to suicide.

Zeitl and Rickel, two women, live together and share a house (Singer, “Zeitl and Rickel” 626–27). They define their relationship in terms of traditional Jewish marriage, each performing a role of the other’s wife: “They had shaved their heads and put on bonnets, as though they had just gotten married” (Singer, “Zeitl and Rickel” 630). Zeitl and Rickel express their relationship through shared Torah study. Staying in their hometown, the two women live openly together as a couple in the house of Zeitl’s father. In this (perhaps, also Freudian or Lacanian) sense, they claim their place in their home and in the male tradition.

In “Zeitl and Rickel,” Singer utilizes the rabbinic symbolism of *havruta* intimacy (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 8.3) in relation to the female protagonists: “It was said that Zeitl and Rickel ate together, drank together, slept together” (“Zeitl and Rickel” 627). Their study together, the choreography of *havruta*, alludes suggestively to sex (in the eyes of the outsider, the passer-by in the tale or the reader): “Zeitl and Rickel, it was said, were studying Reb Yisroel’s books together. Their lamp burned until late at night. Those who passed their bedroom window saw

shadows moving this way and that behind the drapes, and coming together as in a dance. Who knows what went on there?” (Singer, “Zeitl and Rickel” 628). This episode brings together studying and sex, intellectual and physical intimacies, to the extent that studying Jewish books *per se* is associated with queer eroticism in the popular imagination of the shtetl. Learning and queer sex become interchangeable (“Who knows what went on there?”). Zeitl and Rickel boldly appropriate the homosocial space of *havruta*, with its homoerotic and intellectual possibilities, that was traditionally reserved for males. In contrast to Yentl, Zeitl and Rickel do not conform to masculine social roles, either in their intimate relationship or in their Torah study.

The relationship of two young women in “Zeitl and Rickel” is doomed from the beginning. Their union is depicted as impossible and unimaginable, in spite of the fact that, as the rabbi of the town points out, the Levitical “ban applies only to men” (Singer, “Zeitl and Rickel” 628). Zeitl and Rickel imagine their marriage as only taking place in the afterlife: “We shall get married up there too. In heaven there is no difference between men and women...” (Singer, “Zeitl and Rickel” 620). Remarkably, in their imagination the actual marriage is predicated upon the rejection of gender roles altogether. They do not see this marriage as possible in the society where they live. Zeitl and Rickel see suicide as the only possibility of their union.

4.1.7 Non-Binary *Havruta* in “Androgynous”

The Yiddish original of Singer’s short story “Androygenus” was published in 1975. It was translated into English by Joseph Sherman as “Androgynous” almost thirty years after, in 2003. The story is set in a Polish village of Partsev. It depicts an unconventional marriage of Reb Motele, a Hasidic Rebbe without hasidim, without followers, and Shevach, a non-binary Torah scholar who later becomes a Hasidic rebbe too. Reb Motele is a radical who preachers Torah of physical pleasure and desire. Shevach embodies the rabbinic notion of *androgynos*, a person of

both genders.²⁰⁰ Singer's story portrays Shevach as an archetype of the "double soul," *toplte neshomos* in the Yiddish original ("Androgenus" 190), that is present in every human being, according to the narrator.

In "Androgynous," Singer created a continuum of heresy, pleasure, tradition, and knowledge. Gender and sexual transgressiveness or ambiguity come hand in hand with intellectual and religious non-conformity. Similar to Yentl, Shevach, a person of ambiguous gender, enters the narrative as a woman, only to assume a male identity later (Singer, "Androgynous" 98). In contrast to Yentl, however, Shevach, identified by others as "either a eunuch or an androgyne" (Singer, "Androgynous" 98), continuously moves between masculine and feminine identities, depending on the social context (Singer, "Androgynous" 98–100). Shevach marries Reb Motele of Partsev, a Hasidic Rebbe with a radically unconventional, transgressive, Rabelaisian approach to religion that emphasizes intellectual and physical pleasures of Torah study grounded in desire (Singer, "Androgynous" 96–97). Shevach's gender transgressiveness parallels Reb Motele's religious-intellectual transgressiveness. Both forms of queerness merge in their marriage, in sexual-affective queerness.

Shevach is a Torah scholar as well, who often appears like a rabbi and is recognized as a Rebbe by the Hassidim. The scandalous marriage of Shevach and Reb Motele (surpassingly, approved by the religious elite of the time), is essentially an intimate study partnership of two Torah scholars (Singer, "Androgynous" 99, 100). As in other Singer's stories, which portray the transgressive character of queer desires through the imagery of a demonic force or religious

²⁰⁰ On the rabbinic constructions of *androgynos*, see recent works of Strassfeld, Neis, and Lev.

heresy, transgressive love relationships are associated with religious and intellectual transgressiveness. Forbidden intimacies come hand in hand with forbidden learning.

4.1.8 Male Femininity Gone Bad in “Two”

During the gay and lesbian liberation movement in the post-Stonewall era, Singer imagined a bolder scenario of gay *havruta* in his short stories “Two” and “Disguised.” The dating of the Yiddish originals of these two works, which have not been preserved, is unknown (Hoffman 125). “Two” was translated into English in 1976, and “Disguised” in 1986. Both works share similar storylines: two male study partners in a yeshiva from a Polish shtetl fall in love with each other, escape heterosexual marriages, move to a big city, and live together as a traditional Jewish married couple for years, with one partner being cross-dressed and passing as the other’s wife. Whereas “Two” ends tragically, with the heroes’ outing and death, “Disguised” presents a more positive version of this plot that allows the male-male couple to maintain their marital life peacefully in the traditional Jewish community and even reconcile with the deserted wife.

In “Two,” the traditional male-male study relationship shapes erotic and romantic bonds between two young men, Zissel and Ezriel. The same-sex erotic desire is predicated on the Jewish intellectual life and engagement with the classical Jewish texts. Zissel is attracted to “respectable youths who recited the Gemara and the commentaries in a chant, discussed serious things among themselves, paced to and fro across the study house in deep deliberation” (Singer, “Two” 33). The study partnership between Zissel and Ezriel is essentially romantic and erotic: “When it occurred some morning that Ezriel didn’t show up at the study house, Zissel walked around steeped in longing” (Singer, “Two” 33). In a love letter to Zissel, Ezriel depicts *havruta* intimacy in explicitly erotic and romantic terms: “he called Zissel ‘my beloved and the desire of my soul,’ he reminded him of how pleasant it had been in the old days, when they had studied

the Gemara, strolled down Synagogue Street together, eaten prune rolls at the baker's, and confided to each other the secrets of their hearts. If he had the fare, he would come to Tomaszow as swiftly as an arrow shot from a bow" (Singer, "Two" 35).²⁰¹ The pleasures of shared studying the Gemara, eating together, and confiding in each other are the pleasures of "the old days" that are definitional for the intimate attachment between the two men. Ezriel expects the evocation of these traditional pleasures of study partnership to make Zissel respond to his love—and it certainly does. The intimacy between Zissel and Ezriel—eating together and confiding to each other "the secrets of their hearts"—evokes the rabbinic image of *havruta* in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 8.3: "...to eat with him, drink with him, study Scripture with him, study Mishnah with him, sleep with him, and reveal to him all his secrets, the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of worldly things" (Goldin 50). This traditional, archetypical study relationship shapes erotic and romantic bonds between the two young men, which develop into an actual marriage-like relationship when Zissel and Ezriel live together as a couple later.

From the very beginning of the story, "Two" juxtaposes marriage and *havruta* by drawing an analogy between marital matches and study partners: "The marriage brokers assailed him with prospective matches, and the other students competed to be his study partner" (Singer, "Two" 33). Singer represents Zissel's prospective study partners and his prospective matches suggested by marriage brokers as belonging to the same category, as two types of major culturally prescribed relationships that parallel each other and that are essentially isomorphic. The two study partners in the yeshiva, Zissel and Ezriel, eventually reject heteronormative marriages, escape their town, move to a big city, Lublin, and live together as a couple for several years,

²⁰¹ Cf. the images of bow and arrow in the David and Jonathan narratives (1 Sam. 18.4; 20.1-23; 20.36; 2 Sam. 1.22).

“indulging themselves to their hearts’ desire” (Singer, “Two” 37). Zissel and Ezriel “vowed never to part again” (Singer, “Two” 37), and they never did.

As “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,” “Two” disrupts the gender arrangements of the traditional male homosociality of the yeshiva. This time, however, it is a male living as a woman. The affective intimacy between male study partners transforms into a committed sexual relationship modeled after the traditional Jewish marriage, in which one of the partners, Zissel, performs the role of Ezriel’s wife, passing as a woman and assuming the traditional religious roles associated with femininity, both socially and domestically. Apart from the matter of their sexes, the life of Zissel and Ezriel as a married couple does not differ from any other traditional Jewish family, imbedding their sexual-romantic relationship into traditional Jewish religious life. The fact that Ezriel’s wife is a cross-dressed male remains a secret until their community discovers the real sex of Zissel after his accidental death, which prompts “the ruffians in a tavern close by,” angered by this deception, to kill Ezriel (Singer, “Two” 42).

Celebrating the Sabbath by Zissel and Ezriel, a same-sex couple, produces an image of a traditional Jewish family that evolves from the *havruta* of two yeshiva students, as a natural continuation of their bonds. On Friday nights, Zissel lights the Sabbath candles, performing a role typically reserved to a Jewish woman, and his partner Ezriel recites the hymn from the Proverbs that praises the good wife, “The Woman of Virtue,” *Eshet Hayil* (Singer, “Two” 37–38). Zissel “made the challah offering, said the benedictions over the candles, went on the Sabbath to the women’s section of the synagogue, as women must, and read the Pentateuch in Yiddish” (Singer, “Two” 37). Zissel “turned into an expert cook and prepared broths and groats for Ezriel and baked him delicious pastries” (Singer, “Two” 37).

Zissel's excellence in performing his feminine role parallels Yentl's failure to perform this same role. "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" tells us that "Yentl didn't want to get married" because "Yentl knew she wasn't cut out for a woman's life": "she couldn't sew, she couldn't knit. She let the food burn and the milk boil over; her Sabbath pudding never turned out right, and her challah dough didn't rise" (Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" 439). The domestic Sabbath rituals represent femininity and oppressive gender roles that Yentl rejects. The story constructs the perceived feminine role of preparing the Sabbath food as antithetical to the perceived masculine role of Torah study. Yentl's incapability of domestic Sabbath tasks correlates with her desire for yeshiva studies, for a male intellectual world from which women were excluded. In contrast, the performance of femininity by Zissel, a former yeshiva student, includes his success in meeting all the traditional requirements of the Jewish woman's role, ritual, domestic, and educational alike. This includes performing the Sabbath domestic tasks and rituals assigned to Jewish women such as baking challah, lighting candles, and praying in the women's section, "as women must," which allows Zissel, a queer male, to pass as a woman, and to make his same-sex relationship pass as a heteronormative marriage.²⁰² The appropriation of the conventional structures of Jewish femininity, the traditional domestic tasks and female spaces also allows Zissel to construct his own male femininity and thus to affirm his queerness.

The traditional elements of the Jewish women's role in "Two" also include the Sabbath Torah study, reading "the Pentateuch in Yiddish," which refers to *Tsenerene*, the so-called Yiddish Bible, or Women's Bible.²⁰³ *Tsenerene* is a Yiddish retelling of the biblical narratives

²⁰² See the parallels between women's section in the synagogue and the gay closet (Seidman, *Plot* 3–6).

²⁰³ On the hierarchical gendered and sexual politics of Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism in traditional Ashkenazic communities, as well as the association of Yiddish with women and femininity, see Weinreich; Harshav 23; Seidman, *Heaven* 3–7. In the patriarchal Ashkenazi Jewish tradition, Yiddish, the vernacular, was associated with women and femininity ("the mother's tongue"), while the "sacred tongue," Hebrew-Aramaic, the language of the Bible, the Talmud, and other religious texts, was associated with men and masculinity.

traditionally read by and for women on the Sabbath in Ashkenazic communities. It was composed in seventeenth century Poland by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi specifically for women and “men who are like women, that is, they are uneducated” (qtd. in Seidman, *Heaven* 3, 16). “Uneducated” here means a perceived lack of knowledge of the religious texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, the focus of formal Jewish education from which women were historically excluded. Until the emergence of Bais Yaakov schools for girls in the first half of the twentieth century (Seidman, *Sarah*), women’s education in traditional and ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities was restricted to home pleasure-reading. Depriving women of the only kind of knowledge that culturally counted as education denied them the social status associated with this knowledge and the direct access to the culturally valued texts. Yiddish, the Jewish Ashkenazic vernacular, became the language of literature for women. The traditional association of the Yiddish Bible with femininity extended to men who were perceived as effeminate (“men who are like women”) because they lacked formal Hebrew education and, as a result, were unable to read the Hebrew Bible in the original (“that is, they are uneducated”). The Yiddish translation of the Hebrew Bible was itself, in a way, a cultural act of transgendering and queering the normative texts. The female audience of the Yiddish Bible determined the content of the book, centered on the female figures and love stories in the Torah. The title of the book, *Tsenerene*, was taken from a verse in the Song of Songs, which invites the “maidens of Zion” to “go forth and gaze” (Biblical Hebrew *tse’edah ure’edah*; in Yiddish form, *tsenerene*) upon the beauty of the male lover (Song of Sg. 3.11). The androcentric character of this title is intertwined with the recognition of female sexuality. It implies a patriarchal command for a Jewish woman to admire her husband, yet it also suggests a sexual invitation for women (and, by association, feminine, “uneducated” men who read this book), to go out and gaze at the beauty of the male body (and to make love, if one

is to follow the biblical text and to consider the literary context of this verse in the Song of Songs). Seidman notes that “the verse establishes a male object of beauty as its focus, but it acknowledges and invites the participation of women in this scene” (*Heaven* 16). It also suggests a homoerotic possibility of participation in this scene that Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi’s book allows to “uneducated” men “who are like women.” Singer employs the association of *Tsenerene* with femininity in his construction of Jewish male queerness. Singer subversively utilizes the traditional patriarchal, hierarchical binary oppositions and associations between the privileged categories of masculinity, the Hebrew-Aramaic religious texts, and the yeshiva, a place of formal Jewish education, as opposed to the marginalized categories of femininity, Yiddish, and home, a place of pleasure-reading. Zissel, a former *Yeshivah bokhur*, relinquishes his manliness by disowning his education, his scholarship, and by assuming the position of an “uneducated Jew” typically assigned to women or feminine men. Zissel’s domesticity, which is expressed through the Sabbath rituals, activities, and spaces associated with women, goes hand in hand with his disavowal of his Hebrew-Aramaic yeshiva studies for the sake of Yiddish Torah learning. Zissel’s Torah education, in the drag of Yiddish, is in the closet along with his sexuality and his biological sex. On the one hand, to pass as a woman he must hide his knowledge of the classical Hebrew texts. On the other hand, he moves from one type of Torah study to another. He crosses the boundaries from a type of studying that is rendered as masculine to a different form of learning that is deemed feminine; from Hebrew, the *loshn koydesh*, the “sacred tongue” of the yeshiva, to Yiddish, the *mame loshn*, the “mama’s tongue” of home; and from Torah study as men’s full-time weekday job in the yeshiva to Torah study as pleasure, done by women at home on the Sabbath. This movement across gender boundaries allows Zissel to acquire the knowledge of the Torah that other men lacked, a woman’s perspective of the classical Jewish texts and of

Jewish tradition, a perspective that offered a more intimate view of the texts and a focus on what was marginalized or erased in the heteronormative and androcentric men's world of yeshiva learning. The act of the Sabbath reading of *Tsenerene*, "the Pentateuch in Yiddish," affirms simultaneously Zissel's image as a Jewish woman and his image as a queer Jewish man, through his transition from the normative Judaism, a system perceived as stable and monolithic, and from conforming to heteronormative masculinity, to the actuality and imagination of Jewish life and Jewish home, to reading Jewish narratives, concerned with love, sex, and family, the narratives that are often transgressive and complicated and that never shy away from their own incoherencies.

The intimacy between men, Zissel and Ezriel, in the context of the yeshiva, correlates with intimacy between women in the ritual bath, the *mikveh*, in the relationship between Zissel and Reizl. In both spaces, the intimacy is predicated upon homosociality and upon shared study of the religious texts. Zissel, a queer man who passes as a woman under a female name Zissa in order to live with his male lover Ezriel, works as an attendant in the women's ritual bath, the *mikveh*, performing a quintessentially feminine job (Singer, "Two" 38–39). In this capacity, Zissel meets Reizl, a young Jewish woman who attends the *mikveh* to prepare for her wedding. Zissel's and Reizl's relationship is at once a relationship between two women and between a male and female. Zissa and Reizl form a kind of women's *havruta*, studying Jewish texts related to femininity together (Singer, "Two" 40). As with Zissel's past *havruta* with Ezriel, this shared Torah study of two supposedly female study partners produces emotional intimacy, attachment, and sexual desire (Singer, "Two" 40–41). The intimate female homosociality of the *mikveh*, with its heteronormativity and homoeroticism, parallels the male homosociality of the yeshiva, including attention to the matters of Jewish law and sharing personal secrets, yet, due to the

nature of the bathhouse, with significantly greater bodily intimacy (Singer, “Two” 40–41). As the story develops, Zissel’s performance of male queerness through the drag of ideal femininity is disrupted by the complexity of his sexual desires and by the instability of his masculinities, queer and normative at once. While attempting to engage in sex with Reizl, Zissel drowns in the water of the ritual bath.

The analogy between Zissel’s and Ezriel’s love relationship of study partners and the biblical David and Jonathan frames the story. This analogy becomes explicit in the beginning of the story, in the course of Zissel’s and Ezriel’s correspondence, when the two “compared their love to that between [...] David and Jonathan” (Singer, “Two” 36). This imagery establishes the mutuality of their erotic and romantic desire and the intimacy between the partners: “The fact was, they yearned one for the other. Ezriel began to call Zissel Zissa” (Singer, “Two” 36). Singer also reinforces the parallels with the biblical legend at the end of the story, after the death of both partners:

But one morning the cemetery watchman saw a board there with an inscription from the Second Book of Samuel: ‘Lovely and pleasant in their lives and in their deaths they were not divided.’ Who put the board up was never discovered. If the rains haven’t washed it away, mold hasn’t rotted it, wind hasn’t broken it, the zealots haven’t torn it out, it still stands there to this day. (Singer, “Two” 42–43)

After Zissel drowns in the ritual bath, *mikveh*, his partner Ezriel is murdered by the homophobic neighbours. The two male lovers, former yeshiva students, buried together, are compared to the biblical David and Jonathan. The passage from David’s lament, which in the biblical text refers to Saul and Jonathan yet also expresses David’s and Jonathan’s love for each other, mysteriously appears in Singer’s story, as a kind of divine affirmation of the love between

the two men. In this way, the ending of the story connects the queer *havruta* partners to the biblical heroes similar to the way they themselves did in the beginning of the story.

4.1.9 Happily Ever After Male Femininity in “Disguised”

In contrast to the other stories, “Disguised,” which is the most recent of Singer’s queer stories, imagines a successful marriage of *havruta* partners to each other, without any tragic or sad consequences. Pinchosl and Elkonah, study partners in the yeshiva, fall in love with one another, escape to a big city, and continue their marital life together peacefully, with Pinchosl passing as a woman, as Elkonah’s wife. Pinchosl reconciles with his abandoned wife, Temerl, who receives divorce papers from him, remarries, and keeps this secret until her last day, only revealing it on her deathbed many decades later (Singer, “Disguised” 630).

Pinchosl and Elkonah conceptualize their relationship as analogous to the traditional marriage too. This is evident in the following dialogue between Pinchosl and his abandoned wife Temerl: “‘Forgive me, Temerl, but I never wanted to marry you. I was forced by my parents. That is the real truth.’ ‘Whom did you want to marry?’ Temerl asked. ‘Him’” (Singer, “Disguised” 627). The theme of marriage is reinforced in “Disguised” by the imagery of home, “a glass of tea together”: “Temerl could not believe her own eyes. Pinchosl served tea with jam for her. They were sitting and drinking like two sisters” (Singer, “Disguised” 628). Pinchosl and Elkonah conceptualize their relationship within the traditional domesticity of heteronormative marital life.

Pinchosl’s and Elkonah’s shared life, however, differs from a normative Jewish couplehood: their relationship is not predicated on the gender hierarchy or on sexual exclusivity. Even though Pinchosl passes as a woman, as Elkonah’s wife, the relationship between the partners does not conform to the socially prescribed gendered labour division within a household. In contrast to “Two,” where Ezriel maintains his normative manly idleness, in “Disguised” Pinchosl and

Elkonah are both equally involved in the business of baking pretzels for yeshiva boys (Singer, “Disguised” 627), which combines the image of the housewife performing domestic duties and the image of the breadwinner. Even after leaving their hometown, Pinchosl and Elkonah maintain their connection to the yeshiva, a connection that is commercial, social, and sexual: not only do they bake pretzels and sell them to yeshiva boys, but Elkonah also engages in sexual relationships with some of the yeshiva students. This same-sex marriage presents a synthesis of domesticity and sexual freedom expressed in Elkonah’s affairs with yeshiva boys, which he does not hide from his partner: “‘All I ask of Pinchosl is for him to come back soon and continue to bake pretzels for the yeshiva boys—some of whom I have managed to seduce.’ And he winked and laughed” (Singer, “Disguised” 629). The heteronormative homoeroticism of the *havruta* translates into a homonormative marriage, yet this domestic partnership, committed while non-monogamous, returns to the sexual space of the yeshiva, merging the two co-existing Jewish queer worlds into one. This proves to be a successful model of Jewish male same-sex union in Singer’s literary world of Yiddishkeit that is at once traditional and modern.

Remarkably, while the tragic ending of Zissel’s and Ezriel’s marital life is similar to the death of Zeidl and Rickel, in contrast to the male couples in “Two” and “Disguised,” the two women in “Zeidl and Rickel” do not escape to a big city where nobody knows them, nor do they pretend to be a heteronormative, male-female couple. The scenario that Singer offers to the male queer *havruta* partners in “Two” and “Disguised,” a marriage-like life that is unlikely, risky, yet imaginable (and, in “Disguised,” successful), is denied to his female characters in “Zeidl and Rickel,” written earlier.

4.2 In Search for Categories and Spaces: Imagined Realizations of *Havruta*

Queerness in Jewish Fiction of the Turn of the New Millennium

4.2.1 “The Village Had Its Speculators”: A Search for Categories in Jyl Lynn Felman’s “The State of Extreme Agitation”

Jyl Lynn Felman’s short story “The State of Extreme Agitation” (1992), from a collection *Hot Chicken Wings*, is set in the yeshiva of an Eastern European shtetl, too. The author, a Jewish American lesbian writer and performance artist, represents the Jewish queer erotic desire as a product and a producer of shared intellectual pursuits. The story describes the erotic and affective longing of Arye Simcha Chernokovich, a yeshiva student, for his *havruta* partner Barach. In his research, Arye Simcha finds no objection to his love in traditional Jewish sources. When he consults a leading Torah scholar, Reb Skolnik, he receives an ambiguous response that places Jewish homophobia in a larger context of Western sentiments. Arye Simcha himself conceptualizes his same-sex desire in terms of a tension between biblical traditions, the Levitical prohibition and the romantic love of David and Jonathan. The story, however, suggests that this queer desire resists signification. The desire and intimate moments between *havruta* partners in “The State of Extreme Agitation” have different meanings, queer and non-queer, for the study partners involved, for the society (townspeople), and for the readers who see the simultaneous normativity and queerness of these moments in the text of the story.

Arye Simcha Chernokovich, the protagonist of “The State of Extreme Agitation,” is “an extremely agitated student of the Talmud” (Felman 137). His Talmud student status and his sexual passion for his study partner (his state of “extreme agitation” of the story’s title), are intertwined and inform each other. His “agitation” is visible to everyone: the entire town debates its origin, divided by the dairymen’s and the butcher’s theories. “The source of his agitation,

however, was unknown, even to himself” (Felman 137)—Arye Simcha’s desire has no name, it is not culturally, Jewishly intelligible. The shtetl community, however, persists in a search for explanations: “The village had its speculators and at least once a week Shlomo the dairy man and Yitzhak the butcher could be heard in the alley behind the dirt road that led to the old cemetery, exchanging competing speculations” (Felman 137). In the debate between Shlomo the dairy man and Yitzhak the butcher, the supposed source of Arye Simcha’s agitation is either his intellectual capacity or his sexual drive. “‘It’s the boy’s brilliance,’ Shlomo cried, ‘what’s driving him crazy. After all, he’s the smartest in his class; there’s no one smarter than he in the entire village, including our very own Rebbe!’” (Felman 137). Yitzhak objects: “The boy needs a wife, that’s all” (Felman 137). The town people in Felman’s story find it challenging to decide the cause of Aryeh Simcha’s agitation, what it is and is about, because it is no single thing and thus it resists categorization.

Arye Simcha, too, is determined to understand the nature of his desires: “he decided to become a Doctor of Acute Observation, and thus observe himself” (Felman 138). He recognizes that his sexual desire and his studies are intertwined. The moments “when the agitation increased and became impossible to suppress” (Felman 138) are mostly the moments of shared Torah study in *havruta*:

The first happened whenever he studied with Barach, who was known to be his only rival and with whom he has conferred about the problem of the milk. Whenever he sat with Barach for more than an hour, he would become so deeply engrossed in the text that their collective brilliance took hold of their bodies and more often than not, in the midst of a fine point in their discourse of the midrash—not obvious to any of the other students—the two men would clasp hands, staring fiercely into the other’s eyes. (Felman 138–39)

Arye Simcha's desire is connected to his Torah study: he is longing for his male study partner, Barach. The moments of Arye Simcha's "agitation" come when he and Barach are so deeply engrossed in the text that "their collective brilliance" takes hold of their bodies, so that in the middle of the argument about the meaning of a *midrash* they clasp each other's hands and look deeply in each other's eyes (Felman 138–39). This desire is rooted in a shared intellectual enterprise, and it manifests itself in a shared Jewish religious experience. It is expressed in symbolic images of traditional Judaism that synthesize the affective and the sexual. Arye Simcha's erotic desire is a product and a producer of shared intellectual pursuits (their "brilliance").

"The State of Extreme Agitation" also draws parallels between *havruta* and marriage through the image of the Sabbath. Applying the traditional image of the Sabbath Bride to the relationship between study partners affirms the analogy between *havruta* and traditional Jewish marriage. Arye Simcha feels sexually and romantically aroused ("agitated") when he and his study partner Barach pray together, especially before the Sabbath. Arye Simcha realizes that "he loved Barach not like a brother but as a Sabbath Bride, and that his agitation would fail to cease unless his love was consummated" (Felman 139). Arye Simcha's desire for his study partner is a desire for a sexual and romantic partner. This desire is represented by the image of the Sabbath Bride, which is traditionally imbued with erotic and sexual connotations.

Jyl Lynn Felman's "The State of Extreme Agitation" meditates on the relationship between images of David and Jonathan and the Levitical law. Arye Simcha is aware that his feelings for his male study partner in the yeshiva are "unacceptable," "yet in all his studies, he had found no rational explanation for the rejection of his love" (Felman 139). Felman's story depicts homophobia as a collective imaginary. There is nothing "in all his studies" that outlaws Arye

Simcha's love. The traditional Jewish community of Arye Simcha's shtetl disapproves of his feelings for his male study partner due to popular sentiments, not because of the Jewish intellectual tradition.

Arye Simcha's search for the meaning of the Levitical law brings him to the home of a famous Torah scholar, Reb Skolnik. While waiting to see the rabbi and during their conversation, Arye Simcha develops his own queer interpretation of the biblical texts: he distinguishes between what he understands as the Levitical condemnation of the *treyf*, non-kosher, improper sexual lust, objectification of another human being, on the one hand, and the kosher, pure love of David and Jonathan, "the other form of love," on the other hand: "Rather, Chernokovich had come to see it was the unspecific and wanton lust of a man for his brother that was actually *treyf*. And this he knew the Rebbe knew too. Lust itself was the forbidden fruit, for it made an object out of love" (Felman 143). Chernokovich suggests that the sages forbade same-sex love because they were preoccupied with the Levitical, dehumanizing form of desire (Felman 144). Felman's Arye Simcha assigns a new meaning to Leviticus, and in doing so he redefines the binaries: it is no longer a conflict between same-sex love and Judaism, but a tension between the legal material of Leviticus and the narratives of David and Jonathan as the polarities of sexual objectification and romantic love.

In Felman's story, the images of David and Jonathan serve to resist the Levitical discourse: "But Rebbe, my refuge is as David's was in Jonathan, and my shelter is as theirs.' Chernokovich had poured over and over the Bible, that section in the Book of Samuel, where David proclaimed his love for Jonathan. Nowhere was their specific love condemned" (Felman 143). The otherness of queer love is not only in the attraction to partners of same sex, but also in the structure of the desire itself. The affective discourse of David and Jonathan, of culturally

approved same-sex intimacy, provides a “refuge” and a “shelter” from the Levitical prohibition, an escape from and a defense against the irrational, mysterious homophobia of the Jewish community—similar to the support that the biblical Jonathan provided to David when he was persecuted by King Saul. Saul’s attempts to kill David thus parallel the popular interpretation of the Levitical discourse and the politics of the mainstream society towards queer members of the community—the politics that could be murderous existentially if not literally.

Reb Skolnik, who embodies the wisdom of the shtetl, responds to Chernokovich’s argument by identifying the larger, non-Jewish Western society as the source of Jewish homophobia: “But what would the goyim think?” (Felman 145). Reb Skolnik links Jewish negativity toward same-sex love not to the text of Leviticus but to anti-Jewish discourses about Jewish queerness, and thus to internalized antisemitism. The ultimate reason for the Jewish cultural taboo on same-sex desire in modern time, according to Felman’s story, lies not so much in a fear of the queer Jewish Other, but in a fear of being the anti-Semitic other’s Other, in appropriation of the larger Western discourses of same-sex sexuality and of the images of the Jew in popular Western imagination. Felman reads the Jewish narratives of same-sex desire as narratives of Jewish identity and assimilation, on the one hand, and narratives of Jewish experience and cultural identifications that express queer subjectivity, on the other.

4.2.2 “[Not] That Kind of Tavern”: Yeshiva as a Queer Space in Maggie Anton’s *Miriam*

Miriam, the second book of the trilogy *Rashi’s Daughters*, was published in 2007 by Maggie Anton (pennname of Margaret Antonofsky), a Jewish American straight female author. *Miriam* suggests possibilities of disrupting the notion of the traditional heteromale Jewish scholarship by focusing on the images of Jewish scholars who are female or queer males. In one of the storylines, the novel presents the struggle of a queer man to resist (mis)categorization of his desires and

intimacies, which escape a single signifier, in the traditional terms of Jewish law that reduces it to the phallogocentric discourse of Leviticus. At the same time, it shows the limitations of the affective discourse, associated with the images of David and Jonathan or Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, as one that excludes the freedom of sexual expressions and practices and limits access to pleasures for Jewish queer men.

The novel *Miriam* is a product of Anton's own *havruta* with Aaron Katz, a gay rabbi who moved from Orthodox Judaism to Reform Judaism and whose lived experience informed Anton's book. The novel is centered on the image of medieval Jewish scholarship in France. It is set in the eleventh-century Troyes, in the home and yeshiva of Rashi, a leading Jewish authority whose biblical and talmudic commentaries have become the model of traditional Jewish scholarship. The book's protagonists are Miriam, a daughter of Rashi, and her husband Judah, the major assistant of Rashi in the yeshivah and a co-author of Rashi's Talmud commentaries. Whereas Rashi is a towering figure in traditional Jewish exegesis, within the context of the novel both Miriam and Judah are scholars on their own right. Rashi did not have sons and he passed his intellectual tradition to his daughters, his sons-in-law, and his grandsons. Rashi's daughters received education that was typically reserved for males, although they engaged in Jewish scholarship informally (Grossman). In this sense, Anton's *Miriam* parallels Singer's *Yentl*, a rabbi's daughter who, as the only child, studies Torah with her father in secret.

Throughout the novel, Judah, who is Miriam's husband and Rashi's son-in-law, struggles with his sexual attractions to his male study partners and students. Anton's queer character is a Jewish scholar and teacher situated at the very heart of Jewish intellectual life. The novel describes the homosociality of traditional Jewish intellectual life that allows for a greater acceptance of same-sex intimacies. The yeshiva and *havruta* in Anton's book form an alternative Jewish queer space,

in contradistinction to, and in overlapping with the sexual spaces of the taverns, which represent a medieval version of modern gay bars in the novel.

Anton represents queer Jewish existence through a set of binaries: the rabbinic opposition of “the Good Desire” (*yetzer tov*²⁰⁴), which Anton’s characters understand as passion for Torah study, and “The Evil Desire” (*yetzer hara*), which her characters use to refer to sexual desire²⁰⁵; *mishkav zakhur*, the rabbinic term for sexual intercourse between males, or “playing the game,” as opposed to Torah study in *havruta*; taverns, inns, and fairs as spaces for male-male sexual cruising as opposed to yeshiva as a location of men’s Torah study. These binaries, however, are often disrupted and reframed as a continuum of coexisting discourses. This continuum manifests itself first and foremost in the images of Jewish learning that serve to disrupt the binary discourse that presents male same-sex desire and traditional Judaism as antagonistic. Yeshiva represents a different kind of queer space where erotic desire requires a shared intellectual and spiritual context.

In the beginning of the novel, Judah, a young, promising Jewish scholar, identifies with the “Good Desire” (*yetzer tov*), desire for Torah study, whereas he attributes “the Evil Desire” (*yetzer hara*) to his older, promiscuous brother, Azariel: “I guess when the Creator handed out the *yetzers* in our family, you got the *yetzer hara* and I got the *yetzer tov*. [...] My passion is for Torah study, not seducing women” (Anton 32). This dichotomy of desire is closely associated with the talmudic narrative in Bava Metsia: Rabbi Yohanan’s “passion for Torah study” is contrasted to Resh Lakish’s “passion for seducing women.” *Yetzer hara* also represents same-sex desire: “My *yetzer hara* desires men more than women” (Anton 343). The conversation between Judah and his brother

²⁰⁴ In my discussion of this rabbinic concept, I follow the conventional transliteration: *yester*. In my references to Anton’s text and in quotations from her novel, I use her spelling, *yetzer*.

²⁰⁵ See my earlier discussion of the rabbinic term *yetzer hara*, “The Evil Desire.”

assigns a new meaning to the traditional divide of the passion for Torah and sexual urge. Judah's real desire is *yetzer tov*, "the Good Desire," but this very desire for Torah is sexual, too.

Judah's passion for Torah study and his passion for his study partners or students are manifestations of the same erotic continuum. Moreover, Jewish learning incites queer desires. Miriam, Judah's wife, points out to Judah in response to his coming out to her, "I know Talmud study excites you" (Anton 422). Miriam acknowledges the validity of his feelings within the homosocial framework of Jewish learning. Judah's wife asserts that traditional Jewish scholarship is highly sexualized. Talmud study *per se* can arouse sexual desire. Anton's Rashi, too, acknowledges the commonality of same-sex desire in the context of Jewish learning. The discovery of the romantic relationship between his son-in-law and a yeshiva student does not surprise Rashi, nor does it anger him (Anton 416). In Rashi's response, same-sex desire is inherent in the traditional homosocial settings of Jewish learning, "with the intimacy of a study-partner relationship" (Anton 415). Rashi reminds Judah of the rabbinic dictum, "the greater the man, the greater his *yetzer hara*" (Anton 415–16),²⁰⁶ which links sexual desire to Jewish learning. The fine lines between the sexual and the affective, between the homosocial and the homosexual, and between the normative and the transgressive are blurred: Judah admits that "relationships between study partners ought to be close ones, and sometimes a man's *yetzer* is too strong to control" (Anton 293). The expected and approved intimacy of study partnership includes an expected, albeit a disapproved of, same-sex sexual and romantic desire.

²⁰⁶ This rabbinic dictum in b.Sukkah 52a, in the context of a discussion of sexual self-control, refers to a Torah scholar. It suggests that studying increases sexual desire (Boyarin, *Carnal* 65–66).

In Anton's imagined Jewish past the boundaries between male same-sex sexual life and Jewish intellectual life, between the tavern and the yeshiva, are often blurred, as is evident in the following dialogue between Judah and his student Shmuli:

Shmuli's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "But he said you spend all your time at that tavern where men go if they want to do *mishkav zachur*."²⁰⁷

"Josef's Grotto isn't...that kind of tavern." Judah couldn't bring himself to say the word.

"Scholars go there to study in peace and quiet." (Anton 43)

In Anton's novel the tavern and the yeshiva overlap. The sexualized queer space is at the same time a place for Jewish learning and scholarship. Inns and taverns serve as places for male-male sexual cruising and for Torah study at once: "all those taverns and inns for men who play the game" (Anton 428) are also places wherein "scholars go... to study in peace and quiet" (Anton 43). The tavern or inn that functions both as a Jewish study hall and as a sexual meeting spot for men becomes a space for both types of affective community, spatially merging the intimacy of *havruta* and the intimacy of sexual relationship. While, as Judah later realizes, the yeshiva can be an erotic space, the sexual spaces of the taverns and inns (what today would be gay bars and clubs), in their turn, can serve as intellectual and religious spaces, as the yeshiva. As in the yeshiva, the eroticism of the taverns and inns is, to some extent, enabled by their function as places of study.

Another space that merges *havruta* and sex between men in *Miriam* is a fair. Medieval European fairs offered an opportunity to meet many people from various places. For Jewish

²⁰⁷ I follow the conventional transliteration: *mishkav zachur*. In my references to Anton's text and in quotations from her novel, I use her spelling, *mishkav zachur*.

communities, fairs were usually the major places not only for business deals, but also for choosing a yeshiva, a study partner, *havruta*, or a marriage match. In *Miriam*, matchmaking parallels same-sex male cruising culture in the Jewish communities. In Anton's queer reading of history, fairs also become a place of cruising, looking for a same-sex sexual match. The fair in the novel is a queer space, where one can find a temporary study partner or a temporary sexual partner—sometimes at once, in the same person (Anton 394).²⁰⁸ Both parallel the traditional models of heteronormative matchmaking.

Anton's characters represent their erotic and romantic bonds through the images of David and Jonathan along with the images of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, in opposition to the phallocentric sexual discourse represented by references to Leviticus and its rabbinic interpretations. In the following dialogue between Judah, who teaches in Rashi's yeshiva, and his student Shmuli, the Levitical discourse as represented by the concept of *mishkav zakhur* is contrasted against the intimacy of romantic friendship in the context of shared intellectual pursuits ("two men are great friends and like to study together"):

Judah faced Shmuli. "Listen. Just because two men are great friends and like to study together doesn't mean they're doing..."

"*Mishkav zachur*," his young companion added.

"For example," Judah continued as if he hadn't heard Shmuli, "in the Bible, there were no truer friends than Jonathan and King David, and in the Talmud, there are many great companions: Rav Ami and Rav Assi, Rav Yohanan and Reish Lakish." (Anton 43–44)

²⁰⁸ See Biale on Jewish participation in medieval popular erotic culture that included inns and commercial fairs as public spaces for, often transgressive, romantic and sexual liaisons, as liminal territories where people might meet outside strict communal controls (67–68).

The novel links the affective and erotic components of male same-sex desire to the process of studying classical Jewish texts signified by the talmudic narrative of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish. The contradistinction between “*mishkav zachur*” and friendship-studying sexualizes the latter by establishing a link between romantic friendship, study partnership, sexual acts between men, and aesthetic eroticism. Judah and Shmuli locate all these components of the discourse of male same-sex desire within the biblical and rabbinic narratives.

The traditional legal discourse of Leviticus in the novel is paradoxical. On the one hand, it demonstrates the problem of cultural intelligibility of male same-sex desire in traditional Judaism, and a dissonance between the normative Jewish definition of male same-sex desire and the actual experience of Judah, a queer Jewish man. On the other hand, it suggests that the traditional Jewish focus on anal sex allows a greater acceptance of other same-sex sexual expressions and feelings, especially within the homosocial structures of *havruta* and *yeshiva*. Anton’s novel contains criticism of the Jewish legal tradition that ignores the vast array of same-sex sexual expressions and desires and reduces them to one act. With the conceptual dissonance between the legal texts and personal experience, same-sex sexual desire remains the uncanny of Jewish law. The following episode of the misunderstanding between Judah and his wife Miriam demonstrates both the conditions of cultural intelligibility of queer desire and the imaginary character of this normative “literalization of anatomy” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 96-97). When Judah comes out to his wife Miriam, she recognizes the eroticism of Jewish learning (“I know Talmud study excites you”). Nevertheless, the nature of Judah’s desire becomes ambiguous when Miriam shifts the discussion to the traditional Jewish discourse of anal penetration based on the Levitical law:

She only wept harder. “I know Talmud study excites you. If I had offered to overturn the table with you, then maybe I could have satisfied your needs and you wouldn’t want a man.”

“This has nothing to do with overturning the table. Which I do not particularly desire, not with you or with Aaron.”

Judah had no idea what he ultimately wanted to do with Aaron. His fantasies hadn’t progressed beyond the two of them finally being alone together, embracing without fear or shame. But his fantasies must remain that, nothing more.

“I don’t understand.” Miriam blinked back her tears. (Anton 422)

The term “overturning the table” refers to some uses of this term in talmudic literature to denote anal penetration in a cross-sex relationship (see b.Nedarim 20b; Boyarin, *Carnal* 112, 118; Satlow, *Tasting* 238-239). Earlier in the novel, Miriam and her sisters, while studying talmudic discussions of Leviticus together, make a similar identification of male same-sex desire with a desire for anal penetration: “‘Meir told me that turning over the table is permitted so that a man won’t do *mishkav zachur*,’ Joheved said” (Anton 407). Miriam’s inability to understand Judah is rooted in the traditional Jewish equation of sex between men with anal penetration, which consequently treats male same-sex desire as a desire for anal sex (“If I had offered to overturn the table with you, then maybe I could have satisfied your needs and you wouldn’t want a man”). This conceptualization of male queer desire as desire for the act of anal penetration is common in Orthodox Judaism. As an example, Abraham Isaac Kook, a leading authority in Orthodox Judaism, employed these same talmudic passages to support this same thesis in his writings in the 1920s (*Orot ha-Kodesh*; see Naor 157-170). In turn, Judah cannot understand how

a specific sexual act *per se* can meet his desire of “being alone together,” being intimate with his study partner, a man whom he loves (“embracing without fear or shame”). For Judah, his sexual desires are determined by the object of desire (and this object’s gender) and by intimacy with the partner, rather than by performance of specific sexual acts that could be secondary and variable (“This has nothing to do with overturning the table. Which I do not particularly desire, not with you or with Aaron”; “Judah had no idea what he ultimately wanted to do with Aaron”). The mutual frustration of Judah and Miriam suggests that the conversation about homosexuality in the Jewish mainstream community, when it is limited to traditional legal discourses, is based on premises, assumptions, and conceptualizations that are fundamentally different from the social reality and personal experiences of many queer men. The example of *Miriam* implicates that a genuine discussion of Judaism and homosexuality should begin with reevaluating the framework of the conversation.

As in the talmudic narratives about “learned and beautiful” Rabbi Yohanan (b.Bava Metsia 84a), the eroticized Jewish queer men in Anton’s novel, Judah and Aaron, call one another “smart and charming” (401). The Jewish same-sex eros here includes two necessary components, intellectual and aesthetic. In the following episode, two queer Jewish boys, Judah and Daniel, who are study partners and who are in love with each other, are studying a rabbinic text in b.Bava Metsia 84a discussing the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan:

It was then that Daniel sighed and, not looking directly at Judah, said, “Rav Yohanan may have been more learned than you, but I doubt he was more beautiful than you.” [...] “Rav Yohanan may have been proud of his beauty, but I find it a curse,” Judah confided sadly. “In Paris the women give me covetous looks, while the men’s eyes are like daggers. It’s a relief to be back at the yeshiva.” (Anton 35–36)

The reader sees the beauty of Judah from the perspective of Daniel, his study partner, which is similar to how readers of the talmudic narrative see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan from the perspective of Resh Lakish, his future study partner. Like Rabbi Yohanan, Judah is “beautiful” and “learned”; he possesses the two key components of the traditional image of the eroticized Jewish scholar. Judah himself identifies with Rabbi Yohanan as the archetypal beautiful male. Judah’s relief of being “back at the yeshiva,” in his cultural homeland, reaffirms the dichotomy of the sexual space of the outside queer world of Paris and the desexualized space of Rashi’s yeshiva in Troyes where Judah teaches, a place of study and refuge from the temptations and dangers of the inns and taverns of the big city. However, the later events of Judah’s life in the novel prove that a study hall is anything but asexual. It is precisely at the yeshiva where his real sexual desires and relationships unfold. The yeshiva is a true queer space for Judah, far more than the taverns and inns of Paris. The yeshiva of Troyes is marked by the complexity of personal relationships in the context of Jewish intellectual pursuits. It represents a distinctively Jewish queer subculture within the mainstream Jewish community.

Judah’s same-sex sexual desires and practices are closely linked to his Jewish scholarship. Anton locates same-sex desire at the very core of Jewish textual tradition: Judah and his lover Aaron are the scholars who participate in writing Rashi’s commentaries on the Talmud—the commentaries that have become fundamental for Jewish tradition and traditional Jewish learning. When Judah reveals to Aaron the work of writing the commentaries on the Talmud in which he and his father-in-law Rashi engage, Aaron makes a connection between this intellectual activity and the love relationship between himself and Judah. In this context, Judah and Aaron consciously model their relationship after the talmudic image of the relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish:

“This is truly sharing secrets of Torah,” Aaron exclaimed when he saw the extent of Salomon’s *kuntres*. “Promise me that when I finally have to leave Troyes, I can take a copy with me so I’ll never forget my learning.” Aaron gazed up at Judah and added, “Or you.”

“We will harness our passion for each other and use it for Torah study.”

“Just like Rav Yohanan and Reish Lakish. You can be Rav Yohanan, my beautiful, beardless teacher...”

“And you will be Reish Lakish, my strong, bandit student?” Judah asked, flattered and amused at Aaron’s comparison. Then he grew serious. “Except we won’t let any misunderstandings ruin our friendship.” (Anton 402–03)

The intellectual sharing of “secrets of Torah” between two men in love, which alludes to the image of *havruta* intimacy in Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3 (“to reveal to him all his secrets, the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of worldly things”), parallels the anticipation of the sexual “sharing the passion” between them later in the novel (Anton 428). The line between the study partnership and the romantic-erotic relationship is blurred to the extent that the learning and the lover are equated. To Aaron, a copy of the Torah commentaries serves as a symbol of his lover, representing both the scholarship and the love between the scholars (“I’ll never forget my learning...or you”). A copy of Judah’s scholarly work becomes a symbol of his romantic and erotic bonds with Aaron. In a similar fashion, Talmud study for Judah signifies his connection to his male lover: “I’ll never forget Aaron then,” he whispered as the enormity of this knowledge sunk in. “Not as long as I study Talmud” (Anton 453). The identifications with the ancient queer rabbis are arranged by the archetypical features of the talmudic pair: Judah, who teaches in Rashi’s yeshiva, is identified (and identifies) with Rabbi Yohanan, “beautiful, beardless teacher,”

whereas his student Aaron with Resh Lakish, “strong, bandit student.” The identification of the characters with the talmudic rabbis is not only performative; it is also performing: Judah and Aaron play the roles of the talmudic scholars-lovers that they assign to each other, in a kind of citational interpellation. Anton’s characters play with the talmudic concepts of “beauty for women,” i.e., for sexual pleasure and desire, as opposed to “strength/passion/desire for Torah” (and, it turns out, beauty is for Torah, too). Judah, a beautiful, soft, and conflicted copy of Rabbi Yohanan, is contrasted to Aaron, a Jewish scholar from Sepharad, who does not hide his sexual feelings and relationships with other Jewish men and who is compared to Resh Lakish.

Judah and Aaron make an effort to channel their passion for each other into their shared Torah studies, thus combining the affective, erotic-romantic relationship with intellectual pursuits in the context of studying classical Jewish texts. Judah and Aaron engage in a romantic friendship as scholars, which is modeled on the rabbinic image of study partners who share lives in Avot de Rabbi Nathan (Anton 401–02). Judah’s and Aaron’s ideal arrangement excludes sexual acts but nurtures the erotic and affective bonds; it is supposed to channel the partners’ passion for each other into their scholarship. Reworking the traditional homosocial patterns, Judah and Aaron suggest a possibility of the non-sexual affective love relationship, in accordance with the model of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, as a manifestation of same-sex erotic desire that presents an alternative to the normative phallogentric model of the Levitical discourse. Judah and Aaron, as well as people around them, acknowledge that this relationship, although non-genital, is intimate and sexualized (Anton 404). The culturally approved homosocial affective bonds, associated with the images of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, are intertwined with the tropes of control, danger, and secrecy that shape phallogentric Levitical discourse. The intimate relationship is crucial to the partners’ intellectual life: after the death of Aaron, his lover, Judah decides to stop

his teaching in the yeshiva (Anton 450, 453–55), like Rabbi Yohanan who quits his teaching and scholarship after the death of Resh Lakish (b.Bava Metsia 84a). Nevertheless, the intimacy between Judah and Aaron during their shared Torah study creates a sexual tension that complicates this arrangement:

Once the Cold Fair ended, despite his dread of discovery, he was increasingly tempted to put his arm around Aaron's shoulders or to press his thigh against Aaron's while they were studying. And Aaron was finding excuses for his body to touch Judah's. More and more, Judah caught himself gazing at Aaron's face instead of concentrating on the text before them. (Anton 414)

Studying involves subtle moments of physical closeness that express their mutual sexual desire, the moments that allow Judah “to put his arm around Aaron's shoulders or to press his thigh against Aaron's while they were studying” and that allow Aaron to find excuses “for his body to touch Judah's.” It also involves “gazing at Aaron's face instead of concentrating on the text before them.” The text and the study partner compete for the erotic attention of the Torah scholar. This affective relationship is a “newfound source of happiness” (Anton 404): it can make the partners happy no less than a sexual relationship. This relationship is also recognizably different from the conventional, non-sexual study partnership: “Merchants like Natan and Levi would surely recognize how his relationship with Aaron differed from that of study partners like Meir and Shemayah” (Anton 404). The transgressive difference of this relationship requires secrecy (“he began to fear that others would discover, and condemn, his newfound source of happiness”). This form of relationship between Judah and Aaron exhibits a cultural paradox. It does not fall into the conventional, phallogentric category of the sexual (and thus it could pass as an intellectual or spiritual passion for Torah). It is not a de-sexualized friendship of scholars and

study partners either. Both Judah and Aaron understand that their intimate bond is sexual, even though it is not genital. Not only its sexual character is obvious to the partners, but it is also potentially visible to others and requires secrecy. This different and non-signified form of queer eroticism serves to redefine male same-sex sexuality in the novel.

Anton's novel also imagines the traditional, heteronormative Jewish marriage as *havruta*. Before Judah's and Miriam's marriage, each of them searched for a spouse who would also be an intellectual match. When forced to get married, Judah asks his brother Azariel to find him "a learned woman" who "knows the difference between Hillel and Shammai" (Anton 37), referring to talmudic debates between rabbinic schools. In a similar way, Miriam tells her sister Joheved that her prospective match must be a scholar: "I want my husband to be as learned as I am" (Anton 71). After their marriage, Judah and Miriam become formal spouses and informal study partners. Since Judah is not sexually attracted to women, his wedding night with Miriam becomes a consummation of their shared intellectual curiosity: studying the Talmud together performs the function of sexual intercourse (Anton 135–38). Later, it is the shared Torah studies that create intimacy between the spouses and that enable Judah to engage in sexual relations with Miriam (Anton 151–53). These examples invert the theme of *havruta* as a metaphor or cover for a transgressive love relationship, the theme that is common in other literary works. Here the traditional, heteronormative marriage becomes a cover for the transgressive *havruta* between a man and a woman, who, in a traditional Jewish society, would not be able to study Talmud together.

Miriam also initiates the *havruta* of her husband Judah and Elisha, a young man who arrives in Troyes to study in Rashi's yeshiva (Anton 291). As a result, Elisha, who hides neither his past same-sex sexual experiences nor his attraction to Judah, stays in their home, studies with Judah,

and often sleeps in Judah's bed. Consequently, Judah spends "sleepless hours both worrying and hoping that Elisha would approach him" (Anton 320). By suggesting Elisha as a *havruta* for Judah, Miriam transfers the relationship of the two men from the normative realm of intimacy of the study hall into the intimacy of her own family and into their marital bed. Indeed, the relationship between Judah and Elisha becomes increasingly intimate and erotic, although it remains non-sexual (Anton 293–94). Although not being aware of the full extent of the erotic and emotional tension between the two men, Miriam senses their passion for each other, and she recognized and supports this connection: "‘I like to sit with them when they study together,’ Miriam said. ‘You can feel the affection between them’" (Anton 305). Miriam is an equal partner in this affective triangle that she creates, supports, and enjoys. Later, Elisha and Judah name their sons after each other, again with the encouragement of Miriam (Anton 327). The queer relationship between the three partners transcends the concept of the nuclear family and the boundaries between hetero- and homosexuality. Anton employs the image of the Jewish past, when none of these categories existed, to challenge their dominance in her own Jewish society of today's America.

4.2.3 *Havruta* as Gay Marriage in K. David Brody's *Mourning and Celebration*

K. David Brody, a Canadian Jewish Orthodox gay male writer, too, has chosen the image of the yeshiva student in his representation of a queer Jewish man. Brody's novel *Mourning and Celebration* (2009) projects the personal experience of the author as a closeted gay yeshiva student into an imagined distant past. The novel is organized as a dialogue between the author-narrator and his fictional gay ancestor Yankl, a Hassidic yeshiva student in a nineteenth-century Polish shtetl. Yankl discovers his strong erotic attraction to his study partners in the yeshiva. Yankl's idealized romance with Velvel, his *havruta* partner, is contrasted to his failed

relationships with other men. The love relationship between Yankl and Velvel is interrupted by their neighbors who report the teenage boys to the rabbi of the town. The rabbi separates the lovers, sending Velvel to another yeshiva, in Vilna, and attempting to force Yankl into a heterosexual marriage. The antagonism between Yankl and the Jewish community of his shtetl, personified by the figure of the rabbi, leads to Yankl's escape and excommunication. Yankl changes his name to Jonathan, identifying with the biblical love of Jonathan for David, and cuts all ties with his family and community, spending the rest of his life traveling across Poland and Lithuania. In his love relationship with his study partner, Brody's protagonist constructs a personal gay Judaism by queering biblical and rabbinic texts, as well as traditional Jewish liturgy and ritual. In this way, he counters the rejection that he experiences in the mainstream traditionalist Jewish society by reformulating his same-sex attractions as inherent in Jewish intellectual and religious life albeit outside of the established Jewish community.

In Brody's novel *Mourning and Celebration*, studying the classical Jewish texts together constitutes the core of romantic and erotic bonds. Studying classical texts includes learning the study partner's body, while sexual desire and intimate relationship between study partners helps them better understand the text. Yankl perceives the study process with his first *havruta* partner Eliyohu as one that realizes same-sex erotic sensibilities:

Yankl's *chevrusa*²⁰⁹ was Eliyohu. As Eliyohu grew, he became more attractive. Unlike most of his peers, his hair was a sea of blonde waves, spilling over his forehead. He had green eyes and an aquiline nose topping full lips that curled upward into a constant smile. His face was covered in a light blonde down that would soon develop into a full beard.

²⁰⁹ In my discussion, I follow the conventional transliteration based on Modern Hebrew pronunciation: *havruta*. In my quotations from Brody's novel, I use his spelling, based on Ashkenazic Hebrew and Yiddish pronunciation: *hevrusa*.

Every day, Yankl looked forward to seeing him with far more enthusiasm than he had for study. He watched him, swaying gently as he intoned the sacred text of the Talmud.

(Brody 11-12)

Brody describes the beauty of Eliyohu, Yankl's first study partner in the yeshiva, through Yankl's eyes. In this episode of Yankl watching Eliyohu, the body is presented as the text that calls for a sexual and intellectual exploration. In its turn, the text is presented as the body. The readers engage with the text through their bodily movements. The text is represented in their bodies. The study of the classical texts in *havruta* involves erotic gaze. Studying the Jewish texts and watching the study partner are interrelated acts, sacred and sexual at once; these are two aspects of one process, driven by the same passion. They involve the same acts of looking, studying, and comprehending, as well as producing the same sounds (intoning the "sacred text of the Talmud") and the same body movements (swaying): "He watched him, swaying gently as he intoned the sacred text of the Talmud."

The gaze is closely related to the touch or to a possibility-impossibility of touch as a manifestation of queer desire in the traditional *havruta*. Like the gaze, the eroticism of the touch is located in the context of studying the sacred texts:

Eliyohu reached over the desk and turned Yankl's volume of the Talmud toward him, searching for the place. The print was so small that he had to put his finger on it for Yankl to see where they were. He returned Yankl's book to him, his finger still pointing to the relevant text. Yankl took the book and used his own finger to mark the place. Their hands touched. Yankl looked up; Eliyohu quickly withdrew his hand and turned away. He, too, had been aware of the moment when their fingers touched. [...] He returned to

chanting the text, his voice slightly too loud, his swaying slightly too energetic. “Rav Shimon says...” (Brody 12)

The awareness of the moment of touch points to awareness of the erotic desire. The fear of this desire makes Eliyohu seek refuge in the talmudic text (“He returned to chanting the text, his voice slightly too loud, his swaying slightly too energetic”), which itself, including the traditional elements of the study process—chanting and swaying, “slightly too loud” and “slightly too energetic”—enforces the eroticism of the moment. It is the very chanting and swaying, along with the talmudic text itself, that arouses Yankl’s desire. In this scene, the movement within a traditional ritual of Torah study enables eroticism by turning this act into something different in perception, affect, and meaning for Yankl while not necessitating it for everyone else. Eliyohu’s attempt to escape the homoerotic energy of the moment by resorting to the traditional choreography of the learning ritual produces the opposite effect. As with Judah’s escape to the yeshiva in Anton’s *Miriam*, it heightens and proliferates this energy. The primary relation between reading the text of the Talmud and the bodily rituals that conventionally accompany it, such as chanting and swaying, enables an erotic relation produced by the act of Yankl’s watching Eliyohu performing these rituals.

In “Mourning and Celebration,” the queer Judaism of the protagonist is centered on the text and hermeneutical activity. When Yankl’s new study partner Velvel had “grown to know him on a personal level, he [...] felt more than a shared interest in Talmud” (Brody 44). The two study partners become lovers. Yankl’s sexual and romantic feelings for his study partner are framed in the context of Jewish texts and Torah study through identifications and disidentifications with biblical and talmudic figures and through the intimate space of *havruta*. Studying classical Jewish texts together constitutes the core of the lovers’ romantic and sexual bonds. The context

of intimate study partnership in the yeshiva is crucial for beginning and unfolding their sexual-romantic relationship, to the point that the exchanges between the two lovers are framed as a talmudic discussion. The study partners, who are also sexual partners, use the traditional formulations of the talmudic texts (“Rav said,” “Rava said”) to express their feelings for each other: “Rav said... that Yankl has beautiful eyes” [...] “Rava said...Yankl loves Velvel” (Brody 48). The two lovers identify with talmudic sages, Rav and Rava, including these ancient rabbis into their own relationship. The talmudic rabbis, who represent the authority of the classical Jewish texts, affirm the beauty of the Torah students and convey the love between them. The queer *havruta* partners read themselves, their desires for one another and their experience into the talmudic text.

In Brody’s *Mourning and Celebration*, the images of Jewish home and Sabbath are central to representation of *havruta* as a space of sacred Jewish gay sexuality. The ideal same-sex relationship there resembles a traditional Jewish family. Before their separation, Yankl and Velvel have sexual relations every Friday night, when the students in the yeshiva are dismissed earlier and the entire Jewish community of the town is busy with preparations for the Sabbath (Brody 49–50). This arrangement of sex and time alludes to the traditional Jewish pattern of linking marital relations to the Sabbath eve, especially for Torah scholars.²¹⁰ The transgressive sexual acts between the yeshiva boys, who are study partners, on the Sabbath eve symbolically represent *havruta* as Jewish marriage while queering the traditional sexual symbolism that represents Torah study as union with God. The two lovers also symbolically appropriate the traditional Jewish laws of family purity: “They embraced, and remained holding each other.

²¹⁰ On the view in rabbinic literature that Torah scholars were supposed to engage in marital relations every Sabbath eve, see y.Ketubot 5.8, 30b; b.Ketubot 62b; b.Bava Kama 82a. In medieval Jewish law, see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “Ishut” 14.1 and “Shabbat” 30.14; *Arbaa Turim*, Even ha-Ezer 76. See also references in medieval Jewish mysticism (Wolfson 74, 368, 370).

‘How can I wait till next Friday?’ said Velvel. ‘Married couples wait two weeks after the woman’s menstruation. We can wait one. Waiting will make it even better next Friday’” (Brody 50). The laws of so-called ritual purity in Leviticus include a prohibition of sexual relations with a *niddah*, a woman during menstruation. The biblical law prescribes separation of a menstruating woman, who is deemed ritually impure, for seven days (Lev. 15.19-30, 18.19, 20.18). The Jewish legal tradition and customs around so-called family purity laws (*taharat hamishpahah*), developed in the rabbinic, medieval, and modern periods require that husband and wife abstain from sexual relations or any physical contact for a period of close to two weeks monthly. Although the menstruation laws are not applicable to sexual relationship between males, Brody metaphorically applies the traditional Jewish notion of ritual purity, which goes back to the Holiness Code in Leviticus, to male same-sex sexual unions. In this manner, he appropriates a major symbol of femininity and marriage in traditional Jewish culture, turning it into a performative drag, subverting the historic misogynistic meaning of this tradition and reinscribing it as a strategy of resistance to homophobia. Unlike heterosexual married couples, Yankl and Velvel are forced to limit the time of their sexual encounters not by the traditional laws of sexual relations, but by their fears of discovery. Simultaneously, Yankl transforms the meaning of danger into a positive context: he evokes the traditional interpretation of the laws of family purity as strengthening the sexual aspect of their relationship and renewing the freshness of intimacy for a couple. This alludes to the rabbinic notion that the abstinence during the menstruating periods will make a wife more desired by her husband (b.Niddah 31b). This meaning, which is not gender-specific, allows Brody to apply the traditional heteronormative Jewish categories of family life to a male same-sex relationship.

Yankl and his study partner Velvel identify with the biblical figures of David and Jonathan (Brody 46–47), in contrast to the mainstream Jewish identification of same-sex desire with the Levitical law that frames responses of Yankl’s Jewish community. After Yankl and Velvel “made passionate love” in the forest, Velvel asks:

“Yankl, I think I love you. Is that possible? Love between two men?”

“Of course, it’s possible. It’s even in the *T’nach*, the Bible. I don’t believe David and Jonathan were just friends in spite of what they tell us. David loved Jonathan with a ‘love exceeding that of a woman,’ and Jonathan ‘delighted in David.’ There was more than friendship there.” (Brody 47)

The images of David and Jonathan serve as an archetype of intimate same-sex relationship. When Yankl and Velvel, two study partners in the yeshiva, become lovers, each of the partners self-identifies with Jonathan as a desiring subject and identifies his partner with David as the object of desire: “I love you, Yankl, just like Jonathan loved David” (Brody 49); “Jonathan who had loved David, the youth with a ruddy complexion like Velvel’s” (Brody 125).²¹¹ This identification with the attachment of Jonathan to David suggests the focus on eroticizing the other.

When Yankl comes out to his first study partner Eliyohu, with whom he is infatuated, the latter responds with a reference to Leviticus: “You can’t. You mustn’t. It’s a sin. It’s an abomination. It says so in the Torah” (Brody 28–29). In contrast to the biblical law, the conversation here concerns sexual feelings, not sexual acts. Eliyohu’s reference to the Torah and

²¹¹ See the image of David in the Hebrew Bible: “Now he was ruddy-cheeked, bright-eyed, and handsome” (1 Sam. 16.12); “When the Philistine caught sight of David, he scorned him, for he was but a boy, ruddy and handsome” (1 Sam. 17.38–42).”

the centrality of the term “abomination” in his response represent the popular sentiments of modern Western society rather than the biblical text or the Jewish legal tradition, both of which discuss particular sexual practices and never sexual feelings. In a similar way, the rabbi of the town, Rabbi Levy, excommunicates Yankl appealing to the Levitical law: “It is an abomination. The Torah states that it is an abomination!” (Brody 81). The recurrent use of a generic term “Torah,” rather than a more specific reference to the book of Leviticus, makes the Levitical prohibition speak for the entire biblical tradition, turning it into a cultural symbol of Judaism as a whole. Leviticus thus signifies the mainstream Jewish community. The arguments of this community are based on appropriation of modern homophobic discourses rather than on traditional Jewish sexual categories. In a conversation with Yankl’s parents, Rabbi Levy discusses the personality of the boy, rather than his sexual behaviour, debating Yankl’s essential “immorality” and its alleged threat to society: “Two young men, from good families pursuing immorality...what an example to set for the innocent young!” (Brody 132). Both Eliyohu and Rabbi Levi conceptualize same-sex desire in terms of modern interpretations of Leviticus, employing the trope of “abomination” associated with “immorality.” The reason for Yankl’s excommunication is ideological; it is the cultural confrontation between Judaism and “gayness”: the rabbi of the town says that Yankl “rejected our way of life” (Brody 175). Rabbi Levi views same-sex desire and Jewish community as the opposite poles of the conceptual universe. Same-sex attraction drives one outside of the Jewish world. Contrary to Jewish religious law, the rabbi does not differentiate between sexual acts and sexual desires. The rabbi shifts the category of “abomination” from the act to desire, adding a moral judgement to the legal issue. It is the desire, “an evil temptation, an abomination” (Brody 175), that creates the rationale for the rabbi’s decision to excommunicate Yankl. The moral panic of Rabbi Levi echoes the dominant rhetoric

of Jewish conservative religious leaders of the 1970s such as Moshe Feinstein, which in some Orthodox circles persists today, as discussed earlier in this dissertation. The dialogue of Rabbi Levi and Mendl, the father of Yankl—“he has shunned us, and he has shamed us”; “my family...our name...the disgrace...” (Brody 132)—echoes Feinstein’s rhetoric of “obscenity, shame, and disgrace” in reference to same-sex sexual desire, which Feinstein represented as a desire to rebel against God (*Iggerot Moshe*, Orach Hayyim 4.115). The moral discourse here is incorporated into a theological framework. According to the latter, Brody constructs the conflict between Yankl and his community as a tension between two philosophical and religious systems, Orthodox ideology and “homosexuality.” Consequently, Yankl’s punishment is excommunication (*herem*), an extreme measure that had been traditionally reserved in Jewish communities for a heretic (*apikores*), one who rejects dominant Jewish doctrines and practices (but usually not for transgressive sexual practices). Brody’s representation of the past reflects modern Western sensibilities that sometimes construct same-sex desire as heretical—a discourse that could be traced to medieval Christian theology, the writings of Peter Damian in particular (Jordan 29, 44).

Yankl responds to the homophobia of his community by changing his name to Jonathan and thus framing his identity within the narratives of David and Jonathan:

But he wanted even more radical break with his past identity. He found it in his name. He would change his name. The patriarchs of the Jewish people who had changed their names sprang to mind – Abram who had become Abraham, Jacob who had become Israel after wrestling with the angel, and Hosea who had become Joshua. So who was the hero he most admired in Jewish history? The name immediately flashed before his eyes: Jonathan. Jonathan, the biblical character whom the future King David had loved with “a

love greater than that for a woman.” Jonathan who had loved David, the youth with a ruddy complexion like Velvel’s, “as his own soul.” From now on, he would be known as Jonathan. (Brody 125)

By changing his name to Jonathan “who loved David,” Yankl recognizes the images of the biblical David and Jonathan as central for his definition of same-sex desire. Yankl’s change of name to Jonathan also signifies a “radical break” from his community, from the trauma of rejection, from those who frame their own homophobic panic through the symbolism of Leviticus. Yankl’s change of name represents his attempt to escape from the Levitical discourse and from his community that cannot understand him to the discourse of David and Jonathan, to the idyllic home of fulfilled desire and mutual love. In his escape from and break with Jewish society, Yankl uses Jewish texts and rituals to resist the oppressive values of the mainstream Jewish society, to separate himself from the community, and to create a new identity. Nevertheless, his ultimate goal is integration into mainstream Jewish society, finding acceptance, understanding, and equality. Hence, his very act of rebellion and his “radical break” are framed in the religious symbols of Jewish tradition, within references to biblical characters. Yankl’s new name is Jonathan, “who had loved David,” and is an affirming symbol of male same-sex love in contemporary Jewish queer culture. Yankl’s change of identity and the simultaneous escape from his inherited community to a chosen one evokes the modern concept of coming out. However, Yankl’s act suggests secrecy and employs coded language: only Yankl-Jonathan knows the true meaning of his new name. Like gay Jews, the Hebrew Bible as a gay literary canon is invisible in the traditionalist Jewish community.

Not only does Brody’s protagonist counter the Levitical discourse with the images of David and Jonathan, but he also assigns a new meaning to the Leviticus law. Yankl’s first sexual

experience with Avrum, another Hassidic man, who is married to a woman and passes as a straight and pious man, becomes traumatic when Yankl realizes that his partner perceives their encounter as nothing more than an occasional sexual act: “This was to be his destiny. Furtive sex, condemned by the Torah as a forbidden act, ‘an abomination.’ It was all so clear and so completely unfair” (Brody 24). Yankl applies the Levitical prohibition exclusively to this specific type of same-sex sexual practices, to “bad sex”: it is *furtive* sex that is condemned by the Torah as an “abomination.”²¹² Random sexual acts, deprived of emotional attachment and religious context, represent the trap into which mainstream Jewish community forces gay men should they choose to conform to heteronormative values. In contrast, Brody’s novel associates male same-sex sexual relationships within the context of *havruta* with the images of David and Jonathan. These relationships are predicated upon shared spirituality and the symbolic framework of Judaism, yet they stand outside of the mainstream traditionalist Jewish community.

4.2.4 “The Identical Motions”: Between “Students’ *Non-Sexuality*” and Hermeneutical Sex in Michael Lowenthal’s *The Same Embrace*

Michael Lowenthal is a gay male Jewish American writer. Although Lowenthal’s novel *The Same Embrace* (1998) is set in Israel, it presents an American subject-position. The plot line relevant to this study is narrated from the perspective of an American-Jewish, secular, and openly gay protagonist Jacob who visits his twin Orthodox brother Jonathan in a yeshiva in Israel in the early 1990s. While in the yeshiva, Jacob is infatuated with a yeshiva student Ari, his brother’s Israel-born study partner. For a secular gay Jew Jacob, an outsider in the yeshiva world, intimacy with his brother’s *havruta* partner becomes a form of shared Torah study. When Jonathan discovers the sexual relationship between his brother and his *havruta* partner, Jacob

²¹² See a similar interpretation by Artson discussed earlier in this dissertation.

gets expelled from the yeshiva. The relationship between Jacob and Ari thus performs a double function: on the one hand, it helps Jacob reconnect with his own Jewish heritage; on the other hand, it further distances Jacob from the traditionalist Jewish life.

In *The Same Embrace*, the Israeli yeshiva Etz Chaim and its “condemnation lecture” imagined by Jacob (Lowenthal 31)—a lecture that is supposedly based on Leviticus and on related tradition—is responsible for the conflicts between the two brothers, the gay Jacob and the Orthodox Jonathan. Indeed, the longer Jonathan stays in the yeshiva, the more his letters referencing his gay brother are “laden with biblical injunctions and hateful rhetoric” (Lowenthal 31). The text of Leviticus remains unnamed in the novel (“biblical injunctions” is as specific as it gets) and thus becomes a larger, generic symbol of Orthodox Judaism and of the yeshiva. At the same time, the yeshiva becomes an imaginary symbol of homophobia, rather than a real cause of the conflict between the brothers. The Orthodox yeshiva only provides a “more persuasive language” for Jonathan’s homophobia.

How had Jonathan, his twin, who shared his very cells, calcified into such intolerance?

Jacob wanted to blame Etz Chaim and its insidious indoctrination. But he knew

Orthodoxy wasn’t entirely culpable. Orthodoxy had only provided this more persuasive language for a long-brewing resentment. (Lowenthal 31-32)

Jonathan’s homophobia is fueled by his own insecure heterosexuality and fragile masculinity: “‘I’m just finally coming to terms with myself. I’m gay.’— ‘So what does that make me?’— ‘Nothing. You’re my brother.’— ‘Well, I’m not gay’” (Lowenthal 33). Jonathan’s “homosexual panic” is rooted in modern compulsory heterosexuality (see Sedgwick, *Between Men* 89). Yet the yeshiva, as well as Orthodox Judaism at large, gives Jonathan’s homophobia a language and a meaning. The religious discourse of Leviticus helps Jonathan to make sense of his own fears, to

legitimize them through framing them as a cultural conflict between Jewishness and homosexuality, between the sacred and the profane. Unlike the homophobic discourse of same-sex sexuality that has a “language” provided by Orthodoxy, the homoerotic intimacy between men has no name in the normative Judaism of Jonathan’s yeshiva. It is, however, an inseparable part of the yeshiva life, as Jacob discovers.

In contrast to the narratives discussed above, which are written from the perspective of a yeshiva student or Torah scholar, in Lowenthal’s novel *The Same Embrace* the queer gaze at *havruta* is that of an outsider. The Jewish queer difference here is represented through a play of the positions of the outsider and the insider, carried out through the gaze as an epistemological, hermeneutical, and erotic act. This change of positions shows fluidity of secular and religious subject positions and erotic objects. In the following episode, Jacob watches two study partners in the yeshiva. His gay sensibility captures the moment when studying turns into affectionate acts of intimacy (a hug, a kiss, a “two-man hora”):

Jacob watched two students scrutinizing a shared volume, their foreheads pressed nearly together. Suddenly they cried out and leapt into a hug. They had solved some riddle, discovered a hidden meaning. They spun together in a clumsy two-man hora.

None of the other students seemed to notice. This was routine, a minor indulgence. But Jacob was riveted. He lifted a book to just below eye level so he could pretend to be reading while he stared. Eventually, the partners stopped spinning, and each man kissed the other on both cheeks. Even from a distance Jacob could sense the gesture’s tenderness, the familiarity of a married couple.

The hug and kiss appeared completely innocent, but it was precisely the students' *non*-sexuality that telegraphed a pulse of arousal to Jacob's groin. He knew what sex with men felt like. But this brotherly embrace, this chaste dance of comrades, was the touch he has had once and lost. (Lowenthal 58)

The image of learning appropriates and subverts motifs of sexual play, substituting the sexual elements with intellectual elements and sexualizing these intellectual elements. The two students share not a bed, but a book—a volume of the Talmud which they are exploring like a partner's body. Their intimate body contact involves foreheads rather than genitals. The forehead, a body part that represents the brain, is sexualized, or, indeed, becomes a sexual organ. The near-touch, pressing of foreheads signifies a contact that is at once physical and intellectual. The burst into hugging, kissing, and dancing that follows this intense moment of mental concentration appears as a continuation, or an orgasmic culmination, of the sexual-intellectual play. This physical expression of affection is an integral part of studying. It is aroused by a shared intellectual achievement (“they had solved some riddle, discovered a hidden meaning”).

The *havruta* intimacy in this episode realizes non-signified sexuality perceived as loss. The entire scene appears as a routine part of yeshiva life, to the extent that none of the other students present in the study hall would notice it. The erotic intimacy of *havruta* is only visible to Jacob, an outsider watching “from a distance.” Jacob's gaze is itself a sexual act performed as an act of studying: “He lifted a book to just below eye level so he could pretend to be reading while he stared.” The intimate interaction between the students is non-genital. The “students' non-sexuality” involves kissing, hugging, and dancing, spinning in a “two-man hora.” In the context of the novel, this “two-man hora,” this “non-sexuality” is an erotic performance that is invested with an independent sexual-affective meaning and value, although this form of eroticism lacks a

name. Within the dominant phallogentric discourses of sexuality, from a standpoint of stereotypical gay male identity and from a standpoint of the mainstream Jewish Orthodox community alike, this form of eroticism could only be categorized as absence (of genital contact, of penetrative intercourse, etc.). And yet, this “non-sexuality” quite sexually and physically arouses Jacob, disrupting, queering the conventional definitions of the sexual. Moreover, the erotic appeal and the sexual effect of this *havruta* intimacy are significantly greater than those of phallic sex: “He knew what sex with men felt like. But this brotherly embrace, this chaste dance of comrades, was the touch he has had once and lost.” In the eyes of the observer, Jacob-narrator, the non-sexuality of the act signifies sexually because of loss and longing. Yearning, along with the non-sexual choreography, eroticises and sexualizes the *havruta* learning. Jacob’s understanding of this touch of the “brotherly embrace” is fundamentally ambivalent: it is sexual and “chaste” at once. The double dynamic of this scene, this intersection of viewpoints with avenues on different levels, challenges a simplistic understanding of performativity. The intimate acts of *havruta* partners in this episode are of two worlds. They are common enough to the study pair and to the other yeshiva students so as to not stand out. To Jacob, however, they are exemplary acts of something else, holding an existential difference. Jacob is situated in the affective space of the yeshiva that is normatively perceived as non-sexual, yet his unique signifiers configure his perception of this space differently. What is nonsexual to everyone else is sexual to him—partially, because for Jacob whose sensibilities have been shaped in the secular gay world, these acts of intimacy are not common, not normative. The scene materializes as love, but his seeing it in longing and lack enables love to be sexualized, differently realized and, to him, fully realized. The difference of the *havruta* intimacy is how it materializes the lost object of desire to the single onlooker in the story, and by association and through Jacob to the readers.

For readers, that doubled dynamic may materialize a whole new world. Similar to the town people in Fellman's story, who find it challenging to decide the cause of Aryeh Simcha's agitation, what it is and is about, for the reader of Lowenthal's novel "what a thing is" is no single thing.

In this episode, where Jacob observes yeshiva students studying in *havruta*, the study partnership is represented at once as marriage and as affective community. The tenderness of the kiss between the study partners displays "the familiarity of a married couple" (Lowenthal 58), which suggests an intimate familiarity with each other's bodies and with each other's emotional worlds—the result of a lasting close relationship. Jacob, a gay Jew who fails to meet the heteronormative expectations of Jewish marriage and who is alienated from his family, perceives the *havruta* relationship as an alternative form of Jewish marriage and family—one that has a foundation in Jewish tradition and that potentially includes the intimacy of the marital relationship. At the same time, Jacob also imagines the yeshiva as a different kind of queer space, as an affective community that stands beyond the traditional marriage or coupledness. Jacob contemplates the homosocial intimacy of *havruta* in the yeshiva as a lasting process, conventional within the context of Jewish intellectual life:

He thought of all the yeshiva students, all the observant Jews around the world, going through the identical motions every day like the connected legs of some enormous beast. Jacob had never been able to give himself fully to anything, to join without guarding a certain distance. He had thought for a while that gayness might be it, but the whole gay world seemed unbearably contrived at times—too new, too invented, too small.

(Lowenthal 59)

In Jacob's imagination, the intimacy of *havruta* represents the erotic and affective motions that all the yeshiva students around the world are going through every day, thus forming a kind of global affective community, "like the connected legs of some enormous beast." This communal, global, universal queer intimacy of shared Torah study in the traditional yeshiva is contrasted to the unspecified affective limitations of the "gay world." To Jacob, the constraints of the advertised gay community are grounded in the reductive definitions of gay desire and identity, "unbearably contrived at times—too new, too invented, too small." *Havruta* thus becomes an affective community that is alternative to both the heteronormative Jewish family and to the advertised gay community.

Lowenthal also imagines realized sexual possibilities of the yeshiva through the images of sex between Jacob and Ari, a yeshiva student. These images represent what I would call hermeneutical sex and bodily citationality. They depict sexual practices between males that involve elements of Jewish learning and thus turn Jewish religious texts and study into sexual fetishes, as instances of text fetish. In the scenes of sex in the yeshiva between two Jewish males, Jacob and Ari, sexual acts and Jewish religious acts merge in an undivided continuum. Ari is the study partner of Jacob's twin brother Jonathan. Ari's sexual interaction with Jacob, who is secular and openly gay, parallels his intellectual interaction in *havruta* with Jonathan, who is Orthodox and homophobic. The twins, Jacob and Jonathan, represent two dimensions of *havruta* intimacy, one normative and one transgressive, as analogous and mirroring one another. Jacob and Ari redefine the boundaries of the sacred and the profane, queering Jewish tradition and Judaizing sex between men, re-thinking and re-doing the meanings of religious acts and sexual acts. Elements of Jewish learning, the Hebrew blessings associated with the body, the Jewish laws of undressing, the Jewish clothes and ritual objects, the Hebrew names of the partners—all

these become sexual objects that participate in the erotic performance through sight, voice, touch, kiss, and taste, while all the time preserving their religious symbolism. Jacob's desire for a yeshiva student is a sexual fantasy, a fetish, yet it is also a desire for a cultural and affective home. This desire is sexual and non-sexual at once. It is also the only form of gay desire that is forbidden to the openly gay Jacob, something that he must repress even after his coming out. Jacob's staying in the yeshiva is predicated upon his "constant self-censorship" (Lowenthal 90)—until the yeshiva student Ari turns from an object of Jacob's desire to a desiring subject who initiates the sexual interaction.

The scene of seduction (Lowenthal 80) closely resembles a cruising scene in a gay bar, including some typical elements of this common trope in gay literature and cinema, e.g., the characters meet in the bathroom; they are drunk and sweaty after dancing. The difference is that the whole scene takes place in the yeshiva at the celebration of a fellow yeshiva student's Jewish wedding. Tellingly, it is the Orthodox, closeted yeshiva student Ari who seduces the secular, openly gay Jacob. The yeshiva thus is not only a melancholic erotic object for a queer Jew, but it also has a sexual agency. It is a world that engenders a desire of its own, that returns the erotic gaze: Jacob sees the face of Ari watching him, and the two of them are staring at each other's reflections in the mirror (Lowenthal 80). At that moment of the mutual erotic gaze, Jacob thinks of "a blessing to recite upon witnessing a beautiful person," regretting his lack of Jewish education that could have been helpful in this homoerotic situation in the yeshiva: "He wished now that he knew the Hebrew words" (Lowenthal 81).

During his sex with Ari that follows that episode, Jacob's sexual imagination is imbued with questions about Jewish law, such as questions about proper blessings for certain occasions. The erotic act of undressing the partner is at the same time an act of reviewing Jewish laws of

undressing: “While he worked on the shirt, Jacob pried off Ari’s shoes, wondering if there was a proper Jewish way for their removal as for their tying: right, then left; left, then right”

(Lowenthal 82–83).²¹³ Likewise, an act of exchanging bodily fluids is at once an act of inquiry about Hebrew blessings associated with the body. After licking and swallowing Ari’s semen out of his *tzitzit*, ritual undergarment, Jacob, “collapsing onto Ari’s chest,” “wondered if there was some Hebrew blessing, some prayer for the imbibing of this precious fluid. *Baruch atah adonai*, he began silently, but he had no idea how to finish” (Lowenthal 85; author’s italics). These examples associate the same-sex sexual desire and practice with Jewish religious practices and with traditional patterns of Torah study. They represent gay sexual experience as fundamentally intellectual, grounded in the traditional patterns of halakhic thinking and Jewish learning.

Both Ari and Jacob experience their sexual interaction as a moment of religious significance. Ari, with the authority of a Torah student, proclaims: “This is sacred.” Jacob, a secular gay Jew who had never studied Torah, agrees that “this was different,” that “Ari’s words felt true” (Lowenthal 84). Even before, Jacob “understood it wasn’t just the immediate attraction that impelled them together” (Lowenthal 83). At the same time, the very sexual nature of their encounter is different too. Although Jacob had been a sexually active gay man (“It had only been a month or two since he’d had sex”), he perceives his sex with Ari as a completely new experience, “as though he had never held another man” (Lowenthal 83). Sex with Ari essentially differs from any other sexual experience of Jacob to the extent that Jacob feels as if he had never

²¹³ The motif of undressing one’s sexual partner as an element of sexual play in contemporary fiction is often understood as isomorphic to uncovering the multiple meanings of the text. The queer literary use of the trope of undressing serves to rework Jewish traditions, traced to late antiquity, that described the process of analyzing the text as undressing the Torah, removing its “garments” to uncover the plain, “naked” meaning of the text (*peshat*, *lefashot*), which, both exegetically and theologically, emphasizes “the depth of possibilities [...] latent in the text” (Fishbane 38; Harris 262–63; Stern 1; Alter 153–54; Levin 175; Levenson, *Sinai* 4).

had sex before. This religiously meaningful, “sacred,” sexual experience, thus, redefines the very definition of the sexual for Jacob.

Lowenthal represents sex between two men in the yeshiva, Jacob and Ari, as a form of biblical exegesis, a passionate engagement with the sacred Jewish texts through an erotic enactment of a hermeneutical move. When Jonathan, Jacob’s religious brother studying in the yeshiva and Ari’s *havruta*, enters the room and witnesses the sexual intercourse between his brother and his study partner, Ari exclaims: “We did nothing forbidden. It depends on interpretation” (Lowenthal 85). This is not simply an apologetic argument against the homophobic abjection of the mainstream Orthodox community. It is also an affirmation of same-sex desire and sexual practice as a form of Jewish exegetical practice, as a type of reading and learning. The sexual intimacy between men becomes an instance of embodied citationality of Jewish intellectual life.

In *The Same Embrace*, the eroticized body of the *Yeshiva Bokhur* is simultaneously revealed and concealed. The ritual undergarment, which is a marker of traditional Jewish masculinity and religiosity, is the only piece of Ari’s clothes that Jacob wants to stay on during sex. The act of undressing is thus never complete: “‘Take off your clothes,’ he ordered. ‘Everything but the *tallis*’”²¹⁴ (Lowenthal 82). The ritual undergarment of a yeshiva student bears a special erotic significance for Jacob, a secular gay Jewish man.²¹⁵ The association of “this hidden *tallis*, this

²¹⁴ Lowenthal uses the term *tallis* (a Yiddish and traditional Ashkenazic form of *tallit*) as short for *tallit katan*, “small *tallit*,” a term that often refers to the ritual undergarment, as opposed to the prayer shawl, the regular, bigger *tallit*.

²¹⁵ The Jewish customs of wearing the prayer shawl and the ritual undergarment have been derived from the biblical prescription to attach ritual fringes (*tzitzit*) to one’s clothes. The sexual meaning of this concept is evident in its biblical formulation, as the following wording from the NJPS translation demonstrates: “The LORD said to Moses as follows: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages [...] That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the LORD and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge” (Num. 15.37-40). This biblical passage from Num. 15 exhibits anxiety around male sexual desire. It attempts to control sexual behaviors

secret religious underwear” (Lowenthal 82) with intimacy and hidden meanings, with underwear that is erotic and religious at once, points to the hidden part of Jacob’s own identity. Due to its religious significance and to its intimate character, the “secret religious underwear” has an erotic appeal on its own. The ritual piece of clothes that stays on Ari’s body becomes a sexual fetish and a sex toy, a focal point of Jacob’s and Ari’s sexual play. Ari’s ritual undergarment participates in a variety of sexual activities between the partners, ranging from a quasi-BDSM sexual play to oral sex (Lowenthal 83–85). The *tzitzit*, the fringes of the *tallit katan*, which are supposed to remind about sexual prohibitions of the Torah, perform their intended role of erotic memory, although in a subversive way: these fringes remind Jacob and Ari about the sexual possibilities present both in the Levitical law and in the homoerotic world of the yeshiva. For Jacob, this article of clothing also creates a feeling of home, of a fulfilled lifelong yearning: “But lifting the corner of the *arba kanfos*,²¹⁶ then whipping once more with the ritual fringe, Jacob understood it wasn’t just the immediate attraction that impelled them together. True, he had known Ari less than a week; but for months, maybe years, he had wanted to have who Ari was” (Lowenthal 83). By participating in the various elements of the sexual play between the two men, the ritual undergarment proliferates sexual desire and pleasures. Performing its double function in the novel, as a ritual object and as a sexual object, it actualizes its potential of being at once eroticized and eroticizing. Through enacting a sexual fantasy of intimacy with a yeshiva

(“so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge”), through the symbolism of clothes, objects attached to the body (“fringes on the corners of their garments”). In this sense, the prayer shawl and the ritual undergarment are the most sexualized ritual objects in Jewish tradition: just as circumcision, they produce a form of citationality by literally inscribing a sexual discourse of the biblical textual tradition upon one’s body. These items perform the function of what Foucault would call putting transgressive sex into a discourse (21-22, 73).

²¹⁶ *Arba kanfos* (Yiddish and Ashkenazic Hebrew form for *arba kanfot*), “four corners,” is another traditional term for the ritual undergarment, which refers to the biblical commandment that male Israelites wear “fringes on the corners of their garments” (Num. 15.37-40).

student, a *Yeshiva Bokhur*,²¹⁷ who is also his twin brother's study partner, Jacob attempts to connect his life of a gay man to his family and to Judaism.

In Lowenthal's novel, Jacob's and Ari's sexual intimacy parallels a heteronormative wedding of another student that takes place in the yeshiva (Lowenthal 80–85) and in which queer Jews are affect aliens, using the terminology of Sarah Ahmed. While the rest of the yeshiva students are involved in the homosocial physical intimacy through the all-male dancing as a celebration of another student's engagement, Jacob and Ari consummate their sexual passion in their own version of a wedding night in Ari's room in the same yeshiva. The room provides an alternative queer space located in the yeshiva that is in close proximity to the heterosexual engagement party. This literal, physical, spatial, and conceptual juxtaposition of the traditional heteronormative Jewish marriage and queer *havruta* intimacy simultaneously affirms and challenges the analogy between the two.

4.2.5 “Studying, Chatting, Lovemaking”: Jewish Queer Continuum in Evan Fallenberg's *Light Fell*

Evan Fallenberg is a gay male American-Israeli Jewish writer. Fallenberg's novel *Light Fell* (2008) describes a love affair between two Orthodox Jewish men, Joseph Licht, a university professor of Jewish Studies, and Yoel Rosenzweig, a rabbi, in Tel Aviv in the 1970s. The relationship between the protagonists is modeled on the talmudic pair, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish. In the complex relationship of Joseph and Yoel with each other and with their Judaism, sexual expressions and studying Jewish texts inform one another. Torn between his sexuality and his religious fervor, the rabbi commits suicide. His lover leaves Orthodox Judaism. When

²¹⁷ On the eroticism of the *Yeshiva Bokhur*, see Boyarin, *Unheroic*.

leading an openly gay lifestyle after Yoel's death, Joseph nostalgically recalls his relationship with the rabbi, in which the passion for Jewish knowledge and the passion for one's study partner were one.

The theme of *havruta* intimacy that resists the Jewish/gay binary is central to *Light Fell*, although in this work the *havruta* is not necessarily located in the yeshiva. Fallenberg's novel establishes the construction of homoerotic experience as spiritual and hermeneutical Jewish experience. Studying and lovemaking form a Jewish queer continuum, as seen in Fallenberg's juxtaposition of "studying, chatting, lovemaking, eating, showering" (51–52). The sexual desire and the intellectual attraction between two Jewish scholars are one: "I want your beauty. I want your mind. I want your friendship" (Fallenberg 50). Their relationship is also imagined as an ideal *havruta* intimacy, prescribed in Avot de Rabbi Nathan 8.3, as friendship and "a near-perfect pairing. Of minds and interests. Of caring and willingness to do for the other. A physical ease, too" (Fallenberg 34). The sexual and romantic relationship between two Jewish scholars begins and evolves in the process of their *havruta*, as intimate studying and discussing Jewish texts together and writing their own interpretive works on these texts. They meet for the first time when Joseph approaches Yoel for help with his first book (Fallenberg 186). The initial moment of their intimate relationship is predicated upon interaction with the text. When Joseph visits Yoel, the latter confesses: "You've discovered my passion. [...] I am in love with books" (Fallenberg 32). In a traditional move of heteronormative *havruta*, the Orthodox rabbi identifies his love of men with his love of books, leaving his sexual desire nameless. At the same time, the passion for books here is neither heteronormative nor desexualized: it signifies erotic passion for another male scholar who writes, reads, or interprets these books. Yoel's interaction with books is highly erotic: "Joseph could not help but notice the way his long, thick fingers caressed the

holy books, the deep resonance of his voice as he read the verses” (Fallenberg 44). Yoel’s passionate, intimate, erotic relationship with books translates into his intimacy with Joseph, a fellow Jewish scholar.

In Fallenberg’s novel, both partners perceive their relationship in traditional terms of soulmates, as a Jewish match made in heaven. Yoel reveals to Joseph: “I read once by an obscure Kabbalist of Safed. He claimed that God has three ways of letting two people know they are divinely suited to one another” (Fallenberg 39). One of those ways is “a written word that appears to them both and has meaning only to them” (Fallenberg 39). The romantic relationship between the two Jewish male scholars, which is both sexual and affective, is conceptualized as a marriage-like union, a match made by God, and as predicated upon, and manifested in, textual engagement, “a written word,” a shared sexual desire and a shared reading of traditional texts from a very specific, personal subject position of *havruta* intimacy, a reading that “has meaning only to them” (Fallenberg 39).

The meetings of Joseph and Yoel occur on Fridays, on the Sabbath eve, near the traditionally prescribed time for sexual relations between Jewish scholars and their spouses, in this way conceptualizing their relationship as marriage: “All of their meetings included certain rituals, beginning with Joseph’s offering: fresh pita bread and sour cream or mint leaves from Rebecca’s garden or a page of questions from his research jotted in haste then recopied in a legible hand. Yoel brought appetite and answers” (Fallenberg 52). The Sabbath eve meetings between two Jewish scholars include intellectual, sexual, and other forms of physical interaction, as well as sharing food and research questions, “studying, chatting, lovemaking, eating, showering” (Fallenberg 51–52). All these elements fall into the category of “rituals,” the innovative Sabbath rituals that Joseph and Yoel invent for themselves, that bear religious and erotic significance.

Light Fell rewrites the talmudic meditation on male beauty and same-sex desire, modelling the relationship between two modern Jewish scholars, Yoel and Joseph, after the relationship between the ancient rabbis, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, whose attraction was “not condemned by the sages” (Fallenberg 36–37). The title of Fallenberg’s novel, *Light Fell*, refers to an Aramaic expression *nafal nehora* (“light fell”) that occurs in a talmudic tale about Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty (b.Berakhot 5b), which I have discussed earlier. In this talmudic *aggada*, Rabbi Yohanan visits his student Rabbi Elazar, who had fallen ill, and finds his room too dark. To lighten the room, Rabbi Yohanan exposes the skin of his arm, “and the light fell.” The light that Rabbi Yohanan’s body radiates sparks a discussion that affirms the value of Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty in relation to Torah study. In Fallenberg’s novel, Yoel, a closeted gay rabbi, writes a scholarly work about this talmudic legend. The novel is written from the first person of Yoel’s lover and study partner, Joseph Licht, who plays the role of the beautiful Rabbi Yohanan in their relationship. Licht’s surname, which means “light” in Yiddish, and his first name, Joseph, which refers to the beauty of the biblical Joseph with whom Rabbi Yohanan self-identified in the Talmud, reinforce this analogy.

While Joseph plays the role of Rabbi Yohanan, Yoel identifies with Resh Lakish. Yoel writes in his love letter to Joseph: “*I have vaulted over the River Jordan with my lance and found a new world there: your love and G-d’s love*” (Fallenberg 171; author’s italics). This reference to the talmudic account of Rabbi Yohanan’s and Resh Lakish’s first meeting links the trope of spiritual and intellectual transformation to romantic and sexual intimacy between male study partners. In the talmudic legend, the encounter with Rabbi Yohanan signifies an existential transformation for Resh Lakish, who, having vaulted over the River Jordan with his lance to pursue Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty, became Rabbi Yohanan’s student, friend, and study partner (b.Bava Metsia

84a). In Fallenberg's novel, Yoel, similar to Resh Lakish, allows himself to act upon his desires and to pursue a relationship with another man. Same-sex desire here is transformative. As the erotic experience of Resh Lakish with Rabbi Yohanan, Yoel's sexual experience with Joseph signifies a spiritual transformation, "a new world" of love, where his partner and God are united. The direction of the transformation is, however, inverted: in contrast to Resh Lakish, who transforms from a bandit into a scholar, from the world of excessive appetites to the world of Torah study and self-control, Yoel steps out of his world of traditionalist Jewish scholarship into a new world of male-male desire and love. As in the rabbinic tale, in *Light Fell* the desire of the partners for each other is closely related to their desire for Torah. The queer repentance of the modern Resh Lakish constructs homoerotic experience as an intellectual and a spiritual Jewish experience. The pursuit of Jewish knowledge and the pursuit of the study partner's beauty is one process. Their sexual and romantic relationship is closely intertwined with their shared study of Jewish classical texts.

Fallenberg simultaneously compares his characters to the ancient rabbis and questions this comparison. The novel points to a paradox of identification with the ancient text:

Yoel's nod to the Talmudic story of Resh Lakish at the River Jordan proved more puzzling. Here was a sinner, a Romanized Jew, who had stripped off his clothes and vaulted the river for carnal reasons—the sight of the exceedingly beautiful Rabbi Yohanan!—but was spiritually transformed by the experience; returned, as it were, to tradition, law, and study. How could Yoel compare himself to a Jewish thief, a sometime gladiator, steeped in the pleasures of Rome, delivered late to the hand of God? Was Yoel not Resh Lakish's very antithesis? (Fallenberg 172)

The repentance of the modern Resh Lakish is a return “to tradition, law, and study,” yet this spiritual transformation happens through a homoerotic experience, “the sight of the exceedingly beautiful Rabbi Yohanan” and the interaction with him. Fallenberg’s novel thus establishes the construction of homoerotic experience as spiritual and hermeneutical Jewish experience—the construction that was already implicit in the talmudic legend. The opposition of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, the sacred and the profane, the Torah study and “the pleasures of Rome,” is sharp. The cultural conflict of insider/outsider, however, becomes an inner conflict for the characters. The theme of antagonism between Judaism and queerness manifests itself in the dialectic relationship between “the rabbi” and “the sinner,” between the scholarly Rabbi Yohanan and the lustful Resh Lakish before his repentance (“a Romanized Jew,” “a Jewish thief, a sometime gladiator, steeped in the pleasures of Rome”). However, the roles are reversed: Yoel, a renowned rabbi and scholar of the Talmud, who is supposed to be “Resh Lakish’s very antithesis,” self-identifies with Resh Lakish, the Roman gladiator. Their reversed roles, as well as the ambivalent image of the queer Jew as at once a scholar-rabbi and a sinner, “steeped in the pleasures,” exemplified by Yoel, reinforces and complicates this binary opposition. In the talmudic legend, the beauty that the “Romanized” Resh Lakish is chasing is a beauty of a Jewish scholar. In Fallenberg’s novel, a Jewish scholar, Rabbi Yoel Rosenzweig, like Rabbi Yohanan, becomes an object of sexual desire. He also self-identifies with the “Romanized” desiring subject, Resh Lakish, in his attraction to another Jewish scholar, a university professor of Jewish studies, Joseph Licht. In the course of the novel, it turns out that “the pleasures of Rome” (the “carnal” pleasures of same-sex erotic experience, triggered by “the sight of the exceedingly beautiful Rabbi Yohanan”) are, in fact, very Jewish pleasures, contingent upon traditional Jewish scholarship.

Fallenberg imagines sexual practices between male Jewish scholars, Yoel and Joseph, as fundamentally intellectual. *Light Fell* represents the body as the text. In these images of learning as a queer process, same-sex erotic experience, which involves several sensory ways of exploration (through gaze, touch, smell, taste), serves as another instance of Jewish intellectual activity (learning, memorizing, comprehending). A textual encounter (Joseph doing scholarly research at Yoel's home library at the rabbi's request) transforms into a sexual encounter between the two men. The sex begins, quite literally, among books, which perform an erotic function, as a text fetish, arousing desire and merging with the eroticized body of the scholar.

Joseph sat with one foot buried beneath him in the sofa cushions, the other on the floor. The books lay open on his lap and on either side of him and in front of him on the table. Words mounted one another on the page, rolling and tumbling and frolicking together in a passionate riot. [...] Yoel cleared a space and sat down on the edge of the coffee table, legs wide apart, encompassing all of Joseph and the books surrounding him in the angle of his large body. (Fallenberg 45)

In this scene, the books that surround Joseph become erotic objects. They play a major role in making Joseph sexually attractive to Yoel who enters the room. At the same time, the bodies of the two men spatially assimilate among the books. The sex scene between the two men that follows is depicted as a scene of studying the text:

He spread his arms like the wings of a soaring eagle and touched Joseph's head and feet. He lay his head on Joseph's stomach and played his hands up and down his body, stopping to explore and examine. Joseph felt Yoel was learning him, that he was committing the text of Joseph's body to memory. A genius, an *illui*, so why not this, too? Why not use his gift on Joseph? (Fallenberg 47)

Yoel's erotic play with Joseph resembles studying the Torah, "stopping to explore and examine" the lover's body parts like phrases and words in the text. Through "learning" Joseph and memorizing "the text of Joseph's body," Yoel identifies his lover with the Torah. He also transforms the same-sex sexual practice into an act of shared Torah study, *havruta*. Similar to the process of learning, the sexual interaction requires Joseph's intellectual potency of an *illui*, a talmudic genius. This scene constructs sexual experience between male *havruta* partners as Jewish religious and intellectual, hermeneutical practice.

As the undressing scene in Lowenthal's novel, in Fallenberg's *Light Fell* the practice of undressing one's sexual partner bears both erotic and Jewish religious meanings. In both novels the ritual undergarment becomes a focal point of the scene, while, however, performing different functions in each of the narratives. In Lowenthal's novel, it is the only piece of clothes that Jacob wants to remain on his partner's body throughout the entire sexual interaction. More so, he turns it into a central object of their sexual play. In contrast, in Fallenberg's novel, in the scene of Yoel undressing Joseph, the ritual undergarment, the *tallit katan*, must be removed from the body, separated from the sexual interaction, since it represents the normative, repressive Levitical sexual discourse, a conflict between the sexual and the religious, and between the gay and the Jewish.

He paused briefly when he reached the tallit katan and seemed poised to kiss the fringes of this holy ritual undergarment. Joseph knew he was contemplating the daily admonition not to stray after one's heart. He could see behind the wise, saddened eyes the centuries of rabbinical commentaries and moral tales and *midrashim* and *aggadot* about that passage that must have been rushing through the genius rabbi's brain, and certainly many others about the evil inclination. But Yoel banished these thoughts; Joseph could feel the

weight of centuries of learning and tradition being rolled heavily to the side. Yoel removed the fringed garment resolutely, but more carefully than all the others, and placed it atop the pile. (Fallenberg 47)

This episode refers to the biblical symbolism of *tallit katan* as a means of sexual control, a reminder not to act upon one's, presumably transgressive, sexual desires, "so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge" (Num. 15.37-40). The ritual undergarment here represents Jewish learning and the traditional Jewish sexual discourses ("the centuries of rabbinical commentaries and moral tales and midrashim and aggadot") that are localized in the Levitical ban on sex between men and in its interpretive tradition. This tradition, which identifies same-sex desire with "the evil inclination," stands in opposition to love between men. The terror of the Levitical prohibition makes it unmentionable ("that passage"). For Yoel, a closeted gay Orthodox rabbi, the only possibility to engage in a sexual interaction with his partner, another Jewish scholar, is to remove the *tallit katan*, to escape the Levitical discourse, to escape Jewish scholarship, by putting aside "the weight of centuries of learning and tradition." This another instance of bodily citationality points to the repressive elements in the traditional symbolism of Jewish ritual clothes, and in the textual tradition that it represents, and thus to separation between the gay and the Jewish.

4.3 What Makes (Or Does not Make) Contemporary *Havruta* Narratives Queer?

Wherein traditional Jewish writings typically present the homoerotic elements of Torah study as embedded in, and undifferentiated from the larger heteronormative structures (Boyarin, *Carnal*; Boyarin, *Unheroic*; Howard I. Schwartz; Magid; Wolfson), modern authors examine the homoeroticism of learning apart *havruta*'s practice in historical and contemporary heteronormative contexts (Seidman *Plot* 276). In many contemporary Jewish literary works,

same-sex erotic desire is coupled with Jewish intellectual life and engagement with classical Jewish texts. These works include various images of studying and desire in the context of *havruta* where the text and the study partner become erotic objects and sources of pleasure. In these images of study partnership, shared engagement with the text is accompanied by erotic gaze and touch, and the actuality and fantasies are intertwined. These works conceptualize same-sex desire in and through textual practices, representing reading as erotic practice, the text as a lover, and study partnership as same-sex intimacy. Many fictional images of *havruta* intimacy in Jewish literature take a step further and shift the representation of traditional, homosocial and non-genital homoeroticism in Jewish learning in the yeshiva toward a construction of study partnership as a queer space, one which is affective, intellectual, and sexual at once. This shift in the literary representation of *havruta*, however, should not be seen as linear progress that replaces the old “closeted” representations of homoeroticism with new, openly queer narratives. The representation of *havruta* in the examples below involves intersecting languages of learning and lovemaking. For instance, in Fallenberg’s novel, the juxtaposition of “studying, chatting, lovemaking, eating, showering” (51–52) is central to the depiction of the relationship between two Jewish Orthodox male scholars, a rabbi and a university professor. Both activities, studying and lovemaking, signify transgressive difference: non-normative sexual practices between males are intertwined with intellectual and religious non-normativity.²¹⁸

Works of S. An-sky, Jiří Mordechai Langer, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon represent the intimacy of study partnership through themes of nostalgic memory and loss, through accounts of the lost

²¹⁸ The reverse correlation, association of intellectual and religious non-normativity with non-normative sexuality, has a long tradition in Jewish and Western history. For example, the Sabbatians, Frankists, and Hassidim were seen as sexually deviant because of their transgressive religious ideas and practices. Cf. the biblical and Greco-Roman rhetoric of sexual perversion regarding foreigners and political enemies; medieval Christian views of heretics as sodomites; and modern association of homosexuals with foreign influence and political threat (McCarthyism in the United States or Putin’s regime in Russia).

homoerotic world of the yeshiva. These narratives discover lost possibilities of intimacy—ultimately experienced as impossibilities. In contrast, Isaac Bashevis Singer’s queer stories imagine a realization of the homoerotic possibilities of the yeshiva and *havruta* that are perceived as lost in the experience and memory of the writers discussed above. In these narratives, the images of *havruta* inspire new affects and pleasures in contemporary Jewish queer spaces.

Towards the end of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century, Jewish writers tended to place the traditional images of shared Torah study in new contexts, often resisting easy definitions of sexuality and Jewishness. These works show explorations of available categories, a search for new terms and spaces, or failures of signification, as, among others, Jyl Lynn Felman and Maggie Anton demonstrate. Some imagine new sexual and affective possibilities of *havruta*, sometimes in a more explicit manner, as, for example, Michael Lowenthal and Evan Fallenberg do. Some authors, such as K. David Brody, conceptualize *havruta* in more conventional terms of gay marriage, whereas some others, such as Michael Lowenthal, meditate on the gaps between *havruta* intimacies and advertised gay culture.

4.3.1 Nostalgic Homoeroticism and Queer Loss

Queer theorists suggest a significance of the notion of cultural loss for queer culture. Halberstam emphasizes the value of loss and getting lost, “queer art of failure,” as rejection of heteromasculine standards of success, in particular, related to heteronormative marriage (*Art* 87). Heather Love names “the art of losing as a particularly queer art” (24), suggesting that the queer present is constituted through melancholic identifications with those moments of history, feeling, and imagination that mark association of same-sex desire with impossibility and loss, moments of failed or interrupted connection, broken intimacies. As Love argues, this motif of loss can

suggest specific queer sensibilities and deeper understanding of desire and intimacy. Hence, it can become an important resource for queer life. Recent works in Jewish studies, as well, point to the connections between Jewishness, non-normative sexualities, and the Western notion of cultural loss since the turn of the last century until today (Jonathan Freedman 21–22).

The *havruta* narratives discussed in this chapter, such as those in Jiří Mordechai Langer’s *The Eroticism of Kabbalah* or Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s “Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town,” among others, recuperate this trope by invoking melancholic identifications with the past in which there is an association between same-sex desire and impossibility, loss, and failed intimacies. These narratives reclaim these lost or failed intimacies and use them to invent new forms of Jewish queer experience. On the one hand, the themes of loss and failure retain their negative valence. Sometimes it is a memory of the lost homoerotic world of the yeshiva, with all its affective possibilities, or a realization of its limits. Sometimes it is a despair over being rejected by contemporary contexts that attempt to reproduce these past traditions insofar as this is possible at all. The queer characters in these narratives are often tragic heroes. Their intimacies remain imaginary. Their love relationships are interrupted. They have to, or choose to, leave their homes, families, and lovers. They die from grief, are murdered, or commit suicide. Their sexuality stands in conflict with their Jewish community or with their own beliefs. On the other hand, the memory of the loss has a promise. These narratives also show that the lost opportunities can be recovered and re-enacted, and that erotic and affective fantasies can translate into the actuality of life. These works suggest that an escape can signal a new beginning and that there are multiple models of relating and co-existing between the Jewish community and queer Jews.

4.3.2 Resisting Heteronormativity: Between Gay Rights and New Affective Relations

The *havruta* narratives disrupt heteronormative notions of love and eros in Judaism by constructing alternative forms of intimacy between Jewish men within the intellectual space of *havruta*, by resisting heteronormative marriage, sex, and romance, and by subverting traditional gender roles. These narratives participate in the anti-homophobic cultural projects by resisting the modern homophobic discourses in Jewish culture, such as those associated with the Levitical tradition. As such, these works promote inclusion and equality within the gay rights discourse, appealing to homonormative ideals.

These literary works also show transgressive relations and imagine new affective forms of queer experience. They create a different intimate space that is alternative to marriage. In this sense, these narratives contribute to the queer cultural projects.

4.3.3 Seeking and Resisting Signification

The Jewish queer difference in these works of fiction often manifests itself in the non-signification of desire from both Jewish and gay normative standpoints. These narratives depict a queer desire, one that resists signification. They suggest an intersection of viewpoints that appeals to unique queer sensibilities. These narratives thus resist singularity. In a queer way, they disrupt identity categories. For example, Jiří Mordechai Langer's *The Eroticism of Kabbalah*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," Jyl Lynn Felman's "The State of Extreme Agitation," Maggie Anton's *Miriam*, or Michael Lowenthal's *The Same Embrace* represent a traditional yeshiva as a space that produces queer desire that is not signified, that lacks categorization, and in this way it can be normative and queer at once. Seidman notes that the multiple *havruta* desires described in Singer's "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" are traditional and

transgressive at once because “the ‘democratic,’ aggressive intimacy native to Talmudic argument” is foreign to modern bourgeois gender performance (*Plot* 292).

4.3.4 A Marriage Drag: Between the Homonormative and the Performative

The concepts of partnership and togetherness associated with *havruta* make an easy correlation with marital relationship. As Chapter Three of this dissertation demonstrates, this correlation has been already made within traditional Jewish sources, from the Mishnah and the Talmud (what I call the rabbinic marriage metaphor) to the Jewish interpretive tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As well, from rabbinic literature onward, the traditional patterns of Torah study have often been perceived as competing with and analogous to marriage. This chapter shows that these tropes were further developed in modern and contemporary Jewish fiction, which sometimes transformed the traditional marriage metaphor into a queer family model.²¹⁹ Drawing upon the earlier traditions, some contemporary Jewish writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries work to redefine the concept of family on their own terms, without conforming to conventional, heteronormative or homonormative forms of marriage and without rejecting altogether the notion of family, which is central to Jewish culture.

Queer theorists, like gay and lesbian radicals before them, generally reject the institution of marriage as an expression of heterosexual power structures. They see the liberal gay struggle for marriage equality as a key element of homonormativity, insisting that the domesticated sexual respectability of the modern gay family undermines the values of sexual freedom and the sexually transgressive character of gay and queer cultures. Queer theorists, such as Lisa Duggan, Michael Warner, Lee Edelman, Lauren Berlant, Jack Halberstam, and Judith Butler, critique

²¹⁹ See also the use of *havruta* as a relationship model in marriage counseling by some contemporary rabbis (Groppe). As well, see the “matchmaking” websites that help finding a *havruta* partner, modeled on dating websites and using a terminology of “match” or “mate,” e.g., *chavrusamatch.com* or *torahmates.org*.

homonormative constructions of gay marriage. Duggan asserts that “it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (*Twilight* 172–73). Edelman considers “reproductive futurism” associated with family to be fundamentally homophobic as it assumes a necessary teleological connection between human sexuality and heteronormative reproduction (*No Future* 2-3, 21-27). Rubin writes on the conditional acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in mainstream Western society based on respectability that privileges coupled monogamous long-term lesbian and gay relationships and thus creates a sexual hierarchy supported by power structures (“Thinking” 149). Indeed, for some mainstream liberal Jewish leaders and thinkers, homonormativity is a requirement for inclusion. For instance, Bradley Artson, a leading figure in American Conservative Judaism, makes domesticity and monogamy a condition of religious acceptance for gay and lesbian Jews (“Enfranchising”). Likewise, Jacob Milgrom, a prominent Jewish biblical scholar and a Conservative rabbi, suggests that today’s gay Jews can earn a place in the Jewish community by adopting children and in this way fulfilling the requirement of “procreation within a stable family” (Milgrom 1568–69, 1787–88). Elliot Dorff, a leading Conservative rabbi and theologian, in his *“This is My Beloved, This is My Friend”: A Rabbinic Letter on Intimate Relations* (1996), provides the legal reasoning behind encouraging and ensuring inclusion, in synagogues and Jewish communities, of same-sex couples, and for that matter heterosexual couples, involved in “long-term, committed, loving relationships” (31). The legal point that underlies this principle in the document is *mitzvat hinukh*—the legal obligation/commandment in Judaism to educate the next generation. It seems that the thinking was that couples in such a relationship would be in a position to raise children, educate them, and in that way, perpetuate the Jewish community,²²⁰

²²⁰ Generally, Dorff’s document is less restrictive and recognizes the entire spectrum of sexual expressions (41-41). As such, this document allows unconditional inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews in Conservative congregations.

which, essentially, places procreation within marriage at the centre of conversation, as the purpose of sex life (31). The motivation of Artson, Milgrom, and Dorff is Jewish continuity and survival. Their positions are also intended to eliminate the homophobic discourses of traditionalist Jewish communities and to allow for inclusion of LGBTQ+ Jews. Their line of thinking, however, sets limitations for equality, privileging some groups and rejecting others based on their personal lifestyle, on their relationship/family type, and on their reproductive choices.

The approach exhibited by Artson, Milgrom, and Dorff, albeit restrictive in some ways, has a basis in Jewish culture. Jewish society places an enormous weight on the institution of the heteronormative family as a procreative and affective unit. Moreover, Judaism places marriage and family at the center of Jewish religious life. Arguably, the family plays an even more significant role in Judaism than community. Family is a fundamental element of virtually every aspect of Judaism—from Shabbat dinners and the celebration of major holidays to framing intimate relationships. This cultural emphasis on marriage and family comes with its own dangers. In the American Jewish community, marriage has become a signifier of heteronormativity and a central structure for the formation of American Jewish identity since the late nineteenth century through most of the twentieth century. Jewishness and Judaism can be seen as gendered and relational categories, with the ideology of “familism” as the defining characteristic of American and Israeli Jewishness (Liebman and Cohen; Prell 79–80). Hoffman argues that “since at least the great wave of late nineteenth-century Jewish immigration” (12) and during the first-generation assimilation, “Jewish Americans and the texts they produced aimed to foreground and establish their own heteronormativity as a part of passing as ‘normal’ in mainstream America” (7). Marriage, according to Hoffman, has become for American Jews “a

strategy to create and reify their own heteronormativity”; it has become “not the product of heterosexuality but its enabling device and centrally defining act that would make sure that Jews could pass as straight” (8). When heteronormative marriage is “a political and cultural impossibility” (Hoffman 8), such as in the case of LGBTQ+ Jews, the established idea of Jewish identity requires radical disruption and rethinking. As affect theorist Sarah Ahmed points out, in the heteronormative family structures queers become “affect aliens,” alienated from the positive affects associated with the cultural idea of family as the source of happiness (“Happy” 30, 37, 50).

In this situation, the homosociality of the traditional yeshiva, as represented in modern Jewish literature, sometimes functioned as an affective community alternative to the heteronormative family.²²¹ Seidman argues that in Jewish culture of the twentieth century “the sociological and literary return to traditional practices and structures, including sexual segregation, was at least partially motivated by an implicit recognition of the price paid for modern marriage” (*Plot* 273). This price included the loss of the variety of sexual discourses and of the queer erotic possibilities of community as an affective space. In modern Jewish literature, there are images of the yeshiva male-male homoeroticism as the environment that produces normative Jewish family. Seidman points to the fact that heterosexual marriages in traditional Jewish society were constructed out of the queer eroticism of Jewish homosociality in the yeshiva, which “was often the affective basis for the formation of Jewish kinship bonds” (*Plot* 18). The yeshiva and marriage represented “the traditional Ashkenazic distribution of sexual energies between the two connected spheres of a partially eroticized homosociality and a partially deeroticized

²²¹ Cf. the function of homosocial romantic friendships between women in the late eighteenth-century novels as a contrast to heteronormative marriage (Faderman 106–07).

heteronormativity” (Seidman, *Plot* 18). Seidman points to a shift in modern Jewish literature from the view of the homosocial homoeroticism of the yeshiva “as supplanting family connections” to the understanding of multiple overlaps between homoeroticism and heterosexual love (*Plot* 276). Seidman notes two major trends in modern Jewish literature: (a) representation of male homosocial homoeroticism of the yeshiva and Hasidic community in opposition to heteronormative family; and (b) representation of love between male study partners in the yeshiva as “embedded in the traditional value system of Ashkenaz and even as reproductively fruitful,” as “corollary of arranged marriage, socially contributing to Jewish continuity rather than disrupting it” (*Plot* 91). The first type of writings includes the nineteenth-century misnagdic and Haskalah polemic against Hasidism, for example, in Joseph Perl’s Hebrew satire *Revealer of Secrets* (1819), which viewed the homoeroticism of traditional Judaism negatively, as a threat to the fabric of Jewish family life. It also includes works such as Langer’s confessional accounts (1923) that viewed traditional Jewish homoeroticism positively, as promising male-male attachments outside normative family systems. The second type of literary texts include Hebrew and Yiddish works such as Abraham Mapu’s *The Love of Zion* (1853), An-sky’s *Dybbuk* (1914), or Bashevis Singer’s “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” (1962), which celebrate marriages “arranged through strong bonds between friends longing to become more than that” (Seidman, *Plot* 92).

As this dissertation demonstrates, modern and contemporary writers such as S. An-sky, I. B. Singer, S. Y. Agnon, Tony Kushner, Michael Lowenthal, Evan Fallenberg, and K. David Brody, among others, represent *havruta* as a same-sex union by appropriating and subverting traditional gender roles, matchmaking and soulmate imagery, and the domestic symbolism of the Sabbath. The analogy of *havruta* and marriage allows modern authors to explore various types of intimate relationships by imagining *havruta* in terms of coupledness, love triangle, or affective community.

In this respect, these works of fiction work as a double cultural project. They represent *havruta* as marriage or as a queer alternative to marriage. Some of these images at once reproduce the homonormative ideal of gay marriage that has been criticized by queer theorists and subvert this ideal by performing Jewish marriage differently, by disrupting the heteronormative cultural assumptions. Some other representations imagine *havruta* as a form of affective community and as a promise of a queer Jewish home that transcends the traditional language of marriage, coupledness, and monogamy.

On the one hand, the literary representations of *havruta* as a same-sex union can reinforce homonormativity. On the other hand, these representations resist a binary opposition of queerness and family by performing and subverting traditional Jewish marriage. They use culturally available structures in a subversive manner, to perform them differently, similar to the cultural work of drag that performs gender subversively without necessarily rejecting gender altogether. Butler, in relation to gender, points to the fact that “[h]eterosexist constructs circulate as the available sites of power/discourse” and that “[t]he repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization,” hence the feminist and queer work would be to “repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized” (*Gender* 43), through resignification and recontextualization that depend on reception (*Gender* 188-189). These observations can be applied to Jewish identity and experience. By bringing together two separate institutions that are central to Jewish culture, marriage and study partnership, in a queer context, the literary works discussed in this dissertation challenge the heteronormativity of traditional Jewish life and the homonormativity of the stereotypical aspects of gay life, whether it is domesticity or phallogentricity. They work

with the heteronormative or homonormative constructs as available sites of Jewish experience from which to do Jewish experiences of gender and sexuality, by resignifying and recontextualizing these traditional structures for queer purposes. These narratives also challenge the idea of coupledness implied in the marriage trope by representing *havruta* in terms of love triangles or affective community.

These fictional images offer an alternative to heteronormative and homonormative institutions of marriage by constructing a distinct Jewish queer space in which the traditional Jewish practice of *havruta* can be appropriated to perform the function of alternative, queer family with its own affective value and promise for contemporary queer Jews, assuming it can be taken out of its heteronormative and androcentric context. It is a homonormative fantasy of a Jewish gay home, a home that is unavailable within the heteronormative structures of the traditional Jewish family. It is also a promise of a specific queer affective community, one that can realize a continuum of religious, intellectual, and erotic sensibilities, supported by social structures that are available in traditional Judaism and that are unavailable elsewhere.

4.3.5 Performing Gender: From Androcentric Male Cisness to Women, Trans, and Non-Binary Representations

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the homoerotic possibilities of *havruta* are produced by traditional male homosocial structures that are rooted in a patriarchal, androcentric culture and in the historical exclusion of women or other genders. In this way, *havruta* is a gendered practice that shows a particular performance of masculinity. Modern reclamation of *havruta* intimacy for gay or queer life has a danger of reinforcing the sexist and misogynistic norms of the traditional Jewish intellectual life. In modern non-traditional settings, however, the affective and erotic aspects of *havruta* are no longer restricted to male homosocial spaces. Hence, today's

Jewish queer culture can reclaim the queer effects of these spaces without accepting their patriarchal and heteronormative contexts, making these affective relations accessible to all genders.

Some works of historical fiction that I discuss in this chapter address the effects of the traditional male homoeroticism of Torah study on women. Some of these works also imagine possibilities for women or trans or non-binary individuals to access the intellectual and erotic venues of *havruta* in traditional Jewish society. For instance, Agnon's novella "Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town" depicts the suffering of Moshe Pinchas's and Reb Shlomo's wives, which alludes to the talmudic stories about abandoned wives of Torah scholars (b.Nedarim 50a; b.Ketubot 63a). In contrast to the rabbinic narratives,²²² Agnon's story gives women a voice. Anton's novel *Miriam* constructs a heteronormative Jewish marriage as a *havruta* between the spouses, Judah and Miriam, which is a cross-sex erotic space that is sexually normative yet intellectually transgressive (135–38 and 151–53). Singer's short story "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" tells a story of a transmasculine queer female, Yentl-Anshel, in a traditional yeshiva. Yentl-Anshel participates in an erotic *havruta* with a male, Avigdor, while constructing a marriage with a female, Hadass, as a sexual women's *havruta*. Singer's short stories "Two" and "Zeitl and Rickel" imagine traditional *havruta* as a female homosocial and homoerotic venue. In "Two," it is the intimacy of shared Torah study in the women's ritual bath, the *mikveh*, between a female, Reizl, and a transfeminine male, Zissel, who passes as a woman (40–41). In "Zeitl and Rickel,"

²²² In b.Bava Metsia 84a, Rabbi Yohanan's sister is given a voice at one point in the narrative, when she confronts her brother and asks him to forgive her husband, Resh Lakish. While her request concerns the relationship between males, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, it raises questions of its impact on women. It does not challenge the patriarchal and misogynistic foundations of this relationship, however.

two women form at once an informal *havruta* and a marriage-like union, living together and studying Jewish books in the house of Zeitl's father (626–30).

4.3.6 Text Fetish, or The Text Model of Desire and Intimacy: From Torah Study as Queer Practice to Same-Sex Intimacy as Jewish Learning

The images of eroticism of study and related desires, pleasures, and intimacies between males in the traditional environment of yeshiva and *havruta* or similar structures point to what I would call multiple models of queerness within Jewish culture, including what I propose to call a text model of same-sex desire and intimacy. To queer the *havruta* images further, one can view the text as a shared fetish that sustains the bond between study partners. Benjamin Reich, a Jewish queer artist, draws a parallel between religious ritual objects, sexual fetishes, and works of art: “Fetish [...] is connected to holiness. In religion, fetish is when a person makes *kiddush*, if he puts *tefillin* [...]. You take an object, and you make of this object much more than what it is. This is the whole idea of art” (*Schmoozing* 3:54-4:24). This observation can be applied to the literary images of *havruta* as well. Holzer and Kent point to the learning triangle of *havruta*, where studying presents a reciprocal relationship between the two *havruta* partners and the text (31, 41, 52–53). Holzer and Kent, however, overlook the erotic and affective possibilities of this relationship. I suggest that the rabbinic traditions already introduced the possibility of understanding Torah study as an erotic triangle, in which the text is a metaphorical lover of the reader, along with the actual wife and/or the study partner. Together with the rabbinic traditions of the prescribed intimacy between study partners and male homoerotic lineage as necessary components of Torah study, the rabbinic love metaphor of learning can also define the relationship between study partners. Modern queer narratives develop this trope further by representing *havruta* as an erotic-affective triangle that includes the two study partners and the

text that they study. Boyarin notes that the homosociality of the yeshiva environment mediates the erotic relationship between students and the Torah, which is perceived as their metaphorical lover (*Carnal* 188). In the texts that I discuss in this dissertation, rabbinic and modern, it is also the opposite: in these narratives, the Torah mediates the homoerotic connections of male students or scholars to one another. I suggest that the text model goes beyond binary thinking by arranging the bodies and texts, the sexual and the affective, and the erotic and the religious in study partnership as a form of Jewish queer continuum, in which the desire for the text, for studying the text, and for the study partner is one.

Judith Butler's description of identity as performative ritual includes the notion of bodily inscriptions, which, through compulsory citationality, establish textual authority as a form of conventionality and normativity. Butler defines sex as citational practice where citation is a repetition of "a prior, authoritative set of practices" (*Bodies* 171-72) that produces the norm (xxii), yet it also produces "a viable subject" (*Bodies* 177). Butler makes a distinction between "forced citations" and "subversive citations" (*Bodies* 232). The very mechanism of sex being "produced as reiteration of hegemonic norms" allows a possibility of "a form of cultural iterability or rearticulation, a practice of resignification" (Butler, *Bodies* 70). Citation can invite reappropriation and recontextualization (Butler, *Bodies* 169). The fictional *havruta* narratives that cite the tradition differently could be seen as examples of such subversive citations,²²³ as instances of bodily citationality through queering biblical and rabbinic texts and religious rituals associated with these texts. In these representations, Jewish religious texts are cited in *havruta*

²²³ For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term citationality differently from Butler's use, in a narrower sense as specific instances of queer reworkings of traditional texts. These instances can still be seen as examples of the larger concept of citationality that Butler discusses.

study or liturgy, performed in ritual, and enacted by, with, and upon the queer male bodies through subversive performance that is hermeneutical and erotic at once.

The issue of the erotics of reading has been discussed in the works of literary critics and queer theorists, such as Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1964), Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Novel Gazing* (1997) and *Touching Feeling* (2003), and, more recently, Jonathan Allan's *Reading from Behind* (2016). Sontag, calling for attention to the form and not only to the content, writes about the erotics of hermeneutics, sensory experience of the text or work of art that is not necessarily predicated on its meaning (102–04). Barthes discusses the pleasure of writing and the pleasure of reading as erotic interaction between the author and the reader, as exchange of pleasure and desire (4; 27). Sedgwick's discussion of reparative reading, as well, emphasizes the erotic redescription of the older tropes. Sedgwick refers to the act of reading as "sustained seeking of pleasure" derived from the engagement with the texts, even with troubling texts (*Touching* 137). Allan calls for reading that is attentive to the pleasures of the text as the pleasures of life and that recovers the affective and erotic possibilities of the texts that have been ignored or erased (17). In the Jewish context, Jay Michaelson notes the homoerotics of learning, teaching, and knowledge, "learning as lovemaking" ("Da'at" 211), the intersections of desire and knowledge ("Da'at" 210–11), especially the experiential type of knowledge ("Da'at" 212), which Jewish tradition arguably shares with the ancient Greek notion of education as an erotic communication ("Da'at" 208).

The *havruta* narratives show the double phenomenon of the pleasure of the text and the text of pleasure that Barthes discusses (10, 14). Some depict the pleasure of the text, the images of Torah study as queer lovemaking. Others imagine the text of queer pleasure through the images of lovemaking as Torah study, and Jewish queer male bodies as Jewish religious texts studied

and interpreted erotically. Sometimes these double representations can be found within one literary work. All of these examples produce a new queer space in which the text and the study partner become erotic objects and sources of pleasures, and the intimacy between the characters, whether in the forms of non-genital eroticism, romantic attachments, or sexual interactions, is mediated by the Jewish religious texts. In these works, the text-based model of same-sex desire represents studying together as a queer erotic activity and sex between male study partners as a hermeneutical activity. In these examples, Jewish texts and Jewish religious references serve to establish the immediacy and totality of the intimate connection between male lovers.

In the images of Jewish learning as queer practice, such as those in Langer's *The Eroticism of Kabbalah*, Singer's "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," Felman's "The State of Extreme Agitation," Anton's *Miriam*, or Brody's *Mourning and Celebration*, the process of studying is sexualized, often through the physical expressions of affection and acts that bear strong erotic and sexual meanings (gazing, touching, embracing, pressing). Erotic and romantic presence of the partner enhances the process of learning, accelerates the intellectual activity of the lovers, and unlocks the meanings of classical Jewish texts. Sexual queerness, new desires and new pleasures associated with the familiar but often untouchable body of the study partner, parallels scholarly queerness, as the transgressive intellectual pleasures of asking new questions about the familiar traditional texts. In these representations, non-genital, sensory ways of bodily exploration become an instance of Jewish intellectual activity and queer erotic activity at once.

In a reverse move, for instance, in Brody's *Mourning and Celebration*, Lowenthal's *The Same Embrace*, or Fallenberg's *Light Fell*, sexual intimacy between male study partners is represented as a form of Jewish learning, as appropriation and performative subversion of Jewish religious life through a passionate engagement with Jewish texts and an erotic enactment of hermeneutical

moves. These works imagine traditional patterns of Jewish intellectual life, Jewish texts and religious rituals associated with these texts as tools for same-sex intimacies, as sexual objects that participate in a queer erotic performance through subversive citations while all the time preserving their religious meaning. The body is represented as the text, and sex between Jewish men as textual engagement, a form of intimate intertextuality where bodies of Jewish literature and inscriptions or citations of Jewish bodies meet and (re-)read each other physically, affectively, and imaginatively. The text becomes a sexualized body identified with the bodies of the study partners and cited in their bodies. Study partnership acquires a larger meaning of sharing the text and the body, ideas and bodily fluids, insights and pleasures, sharing intellectual and physical forms of knowledge found in books, minds, and bodies.

4.3.7 *Havruta* as Queer Roleplay: (Dis)Identifications with Traditional Images

Many authors depict *havruta* as a textual-erotic roleplay, for instance, through identifications with the biblical figures of David and Jonathan that these writers reimagine as queer *havruta* partners²²⁴ or with the rabbinic figures of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish who are represented as both study partners and lovers, sometimes by conflating the two legends. Arguably, these two legends serve as foundational texts for queer representation of *havruta* in contemporary works of fiction. They do so because of the significance of biblical and talmudic traditions for Jewish culture and identity and because of the homoerotic potential of these stories that can serve as counter-traditions that resist the dominant in Judaism homophobic discourses associated with biblical and rabbinic laws, especially with the Levitical tradition. In modern queer narratives, the

²²⁴ See my detailed discussion of some of the modern Jewish queer representations of David and Jonathan in my article "Same-Sex Desire and Jewish Community: Queering Biblical Texts in Canadian and American Jewish Literature" (*Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2017, pp. 249-267). The queer *havruta* narratives in modern Jewish literature also draw upon homoeroticism of other biblical images such as Jacob, Joseph, or the prophets. Critical analysis of these images deserves a separate study.

symbolism of biblical and rabbinic figures often serves to affirm the social approval of the romantic connection between *havruta* partners. Yet they also demonstrate the failure of linear identification, ruptures and discontinuities between traditional images and modern queer experiences.

Generally, queer theory and queer politics reject identity. According to Butler, a queer reception of mainstream cultural images necessarily denotes a failure of identification, which in itself is an enacted fantasy, a desire for coherence (*Bodies* 185), “this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong,” and this slippage becomes “the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference” (*Bodies* 219). When a prescribed identification and forced citations are no longer possible yet the sites of cultural identification are still central to the subject’s self-understanding, subversive citations that realize different sensibilities, presented from a different subject-position, can become a source of a new meaning (Butler, *Bodies* 185).

José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of queer (dis)identifications provides a helpful framework for discussing the ways modern Jewish queer culture can reclaim and subvert traditional Judaic narratives and create new Jewish queer spaces through a return to images of *havruta* as ones that can be read as queer. In his discussion of the relation of queers of colour to their mainstream traditional cultures, Muñoz describes disidentification as a queer hermeneutical strategy that “works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously,” “on, with, and against a cultural form,” shifting between reception and production, and “decoding a cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (*Disidentifications* 5, 12, 25). Muñoz describes the practice of “crafting and performing the self,” formation of multiple, hybrid, fragmented identities, as a process of (dis)identification from/with

popular images and their reworkings from within and outside simultaneously (*Disidentifications* 3–8). According to Muñoz, identification has a danger of assimilation and conformity. The culturally expected, assimilatory forms of heteronormative identification negate one’s sexual subjectivity. In its turn, the oppositional queer counter-identification, rejection of the norm and escape from the traditional formations, rejects one’s ethnoreligious subjectivity. In addition, this attempt to escape the mainstream symbolic system creates “a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of ‘counterdetermination’” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 11), since minority isolationism is necessary “to maintain the status of the dominant order” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 14). Instead, the strategy of disidentification, in Muñoz’s theory, “nonlinear or nonnormative modes of identification” participate in the formation of multiple, hybrid identities through working on, with, and against a dominant cultural form (*Disidentifications* 3–8, 30). This strategy transforms a cultural logic from within, enacting change through a transformation of the mainstream images and identificatory sites, through reading “oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 12). The process of reworkings the traditional images does not dismiss, repress, or whitewash the damaging effects of heteronormative, misogynistic, or racist components of the identification; rather, it subverts these elements, shows their contradictory character, restructures their logic, and re-imagines them in new terms, reclaiming traditional images for new contexts. Muñoz’s understanding of queer hermeneutics as (dis)identifications that is central to queer ethnoreligious and racial minorities can be helpful in describing Jewish queer strategies of cultural change that attempt at transforming tradition from within. The contemporary (dis)identifications with some of the symbols that are definitional for traditional

Judaism and for modern Jewish identity contribute to the change of the larger structures of power and authority, deconstructing the mechanisms of heteronormativity, gender roles, and compulsory heterosexuality in Jewish texts and communities.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.1 Transgressive Effects of Normative *Havruta* Intimacies: Outcomes and Implications

The chapters above demonstrate that the cultural pattern of returning to the homoeroticism of study partnership in Jewish texts, along with the significance of *havruta* to the development of Jewish intellectual and religious life through the male homosocial study experience, establishes the trope of queer *havruta*, as well as related textual traditions in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, as part of the queer literary canon. The queer images of *havruta* also allow rethinking conventional sexual categories by enabling new pleasures and new affective relations. This dissertation suggests that literary representations of the traditional Jewish practice of long-term study partnership foster a unique form of intimate connection, enabling us to envision *havruta* as a queer space within the Jewish community. It shows that creating a queer literary genealogy of *havruta* allows affirmative redescription of the mainstream cultural sites that have been conventionally read through the lens of heteronormative or sexist assumptions. The writers that I discuss in this dissertation search for alternative ways to conceptualize male-male desire, in particular, through affective and eroticizing modes of reading the Jewish past and Jewish intellectual life. Ultimately, the queer narratives of study partnership contribute to the collective memory of queer Jews.

The construction of a Jewish queer literary genealogy of *havruta* discussed in this dissertation has a power to recover lost or erased voices and to transform the tradition in a more inclusive manner, without misrepresenting the traditional texts and practices and without idealizing them. It shows moments in the process of Jewish queer self-fashioning that correspond to the historical and present ways of making or performing Jewish identity through interpretation and reworkings

of earlier texts and practices. It develops in a queer way the “epistemic appropriation” (Segal, “Schooling” 159) characteristic of *havruta* learning, the study partners’ reading themselves into the text and out of it as a way of constructing or performing the text’s meaning and their own identities. This is similar to the techniques of the rabbinic midrash, a genre of Jewish biblical exegesis that is called to fill in the gaps in a narrative. Just as the rabbinic midrash, the queer images of *havruta* occupy an area “in-between”— between what is said and what is not said, between the potential and the realization, between multiplicity of voices and silences, as well as between text, social reality, cultural imagination, and personal experience. Just as the midrash, these images are pluralistic in a postmodern sense: they do not lay claim of the truth; rather, they suggest a possibility of a particular vision that coexists with a variety of other angles. Thus, they create a way for marginalized voices to enter a conversation.

This dissertation explores cultural imaginations of the texts that construct a queer erotic in Jewish culture. It points to varying Jewish normativities, which include scholarly homoeroticism. The rabbinic constructions of homoeroticized intellectualism in late antiquity, in the texts of the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash, produced the trope of study partnership as a sanctioned space of male-male intimacies, which was enabled by the discursive duality of ancient Judaic culture and by the rabbinic performances of masculinity, as one can see, for example, in the Rabbi Yohanan Cycle in b.Bava Metsia84a. Modern and contemporary Jewish texts developed this tradition of homoerotic scholarship along the lines of modern gender and sexual categories and often against these categories. The homosocial continuum of traditional Judaism, while grounded in the oppressive and exclusionary cultural norms, still allows possibilities for queering, subverting Jewish masculinities and sexualities in new contexts.

In the twentieth and twenty first centuries, the interest in the traditional intimacy of *havruta* brings together differently positioned authors with diverse personal and professional trajectories. An-sky left behind his Orthodox Jewish background to become a secular socialist politician in the Russian Empire. Langer, in an opposite move, left his assimilated Jewish family to join a Hasidic community in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Agnon and Singer were heterosexual authors who grew up in Eastern European shtetls and moved to Israel and America respectively. Kushner and Lowenthal are secular gay male writers born and raised in the U.S. Felman and Anton are female American writers, lesbian and straight respectively. Greenberg is an American Orthodox rabbi and gay activist. Brody is an Orthodox Jewish gay author who moved to Canada from the U.K. Fallenberg moved from the U.S. to Israel. These writers share an attention to the pluralistic and ambiguous character of traditional Jewish gender and sexual categories which often contest their own norms or allow divergent ways of their reading and performing. The homosocial space of shared Torah study, normative and queer at once, enables new erotic and affective possibilities unavailable outside of its cultural and social context. As this dissertation argues, this erotic difference prompted the interest of modern and contemporary Jewish writers and produced the need for reclaiming *havruta* intimacies today.

In the literary works discussed here, Jewish textual attractions are primary, whereas queer sexual or romantic attractions stem from the shared Torah study. For example, Yentl in Singer's story is driven to the yeshiva by a passion for Torah, and only in this context Yentl's queer sexualities start manifesting, as a way of realizing and performing the desire for knowledge. Langer represents the study hall of the yeshiva as a producer of homoerotic desires. In Greenberg's memoir, his attractions to other male yeshiva students follow his attractions to the yeshiva studies as such. Joseph and Yoel in Fallenberg's novel develop their love relationship

after and in the context of their shared studies of Jewish texts. Other literary works discussed here generally follow this pattern. In this manner, Jewish learning, as it depicted in the works I discuss in this dissertation, is not so much an instance of sublimation of same-sex desires but more an enabling structure for realizing, inciting, proliferating, and shaping specific forms of these desires. The motif of a cultural loss and the longing for the lost erotic and/or affective possibilities eroticises, romanticises, and sometimes sexualizes the *havruta* learning in these writers' texts, as one can see in Langer's confessional narratives, in historical fiction of Agnon or Anton, or in the yeshiva images in Lowenthal's novel.

The examples discussed in this dissertation complicate and interrupt today's binary definitions of normativity and queerness, sexuality and non-sexuality by drawing attention to a double cultural effect of the normativity of traditional *havruta* intimacy. On one hand, this intimacy points to the discursive invisibility of same-sex desire. On the other, it resists fixed identities, showing the incoherence of gender and sexual structures in traditional Judaism. At the same time, there is a distinction between the normativity of the historical homosocial relations (and, in modern contexts, homonormativity of gay unions) and the transgressiveness of queer relations. In the literary representations of *havruta*, the homosocial intimacy between men is at once normative and queer, predicated on the erotic sensibilities of the reader or the fictional viewer. The lack of categorization or signification in these narratives produces a double dynamic, a combination of viewpoints and dimensions that overlap yet do not intersect. This effect, to some extent, is a product of the fundamental break between contemporary queerness and traditional homosocial homoeroticism. The examples discussed in this dissertation demonstrate that the traditional normativity of *havruta* intimacy can become transgressive from a modern queer perspective. Moreover, in these texts, an act of Jewish learning acquires a fundamental ambiguity

as simultaneously normative and queer. It enables different meanings in response to unique sensibilities of the participants, viewers, and readers, as can be seen in multiple examples from the stories of Singer and Felman or novels of Brody, Anton, and Lowenthal, among others. As such, it escapes categorization, because it is not a single phenomenon but rather a site of multiple signifiers that are not reducible to one another.

The traditional Jewish texts and the homosocial practice of study partnership that they depict demonstrate a specific form of heteronormativity (and related homoeroticism) that differentiates between the phallocentric discourse of the signified and abjected sexual practices and the affective discourse of a non-signified queerness that is normative and subversive at once. With the rise of the modern category of sexuality, these traditional homoerotic possibilities became twinned with homophobia in many traditionalist Jewish communities that conflated the halakhic prohibition of sex between males with modern Western homophobic attitudes. This new Jewish context produced a new duality: the disavowed symbolic homosexuality enabled the actual homoeroticism or queerness that was not signified as homosexuality to retain its key role. Hence, the homoeroticism of today's traditionalist yeshiva is marked by an uneasy relationship between the abjected signified gayness and, as in pre-modern Judaism, non-signified queerness, still normative yet ever more transgressive.

The examples discussed in this dissertation suggest rethinking of cultural definitions of desire and desirability through representations of a Jewish scholar as an object of desire. They introduce erotic norms of traditional Jewish culture, which eroticizes scholarly masculinity, into the modern gay and queer cultures (especially Jewish ones). This type of eroticism can be defined by the Jewish texts as objects of study and as shared erotic objects, by the soft

masculinity of the Yeshiva Bokhur, or by the very intimacy of Jewish religious sensibilities and ways of relating to Jewish texts and to each other.

The homosociality of traditional Jewish learning can incite new pleasures, affective relations, and ethical awareness. The polymorphous erotic desires and pleasures (what can be called the text fetish, hermeneutical sex, and bodily citationality) are associated with Jewish intellectual pursuits and are not reducible to genital contact or penetrative practices. The emotional connection and commitment that the intimacy of *havruta* involves encourage vulnerability and mutual care and support rather than competition. In this sense, the Jewish scholar can be eroticised through a fantasy of caring and mutual responsibility. The sexual and affective dimensions of study partnership participate in a shared task of meaning making.

The *havruta* narratives appropriate the traditional symbolism of Jewish marriage and family, central to Jewish culture and identity. Oftentimes they subvert its heteronormative and patriarchal underpinnings and perform it differently, as a site of queer intimacies and affects. For instance, An-sky depicts a quasi-marital relationship between study partners. Singer's characters perform traditional Jewish marriage as a drag. Brody's novel reclaims central elements of the heteronormative Jewish marriage for constructing a gay Jewish union. Anton's novel imagines a variety of queer marital arrangements within the settings of a traditional Jewish family and yeshiva.

The marriage drag is also related to the image of queer *havruta* as an affective community. The nature of the traditional *havruta* as a network of "relational learning communities" (Gold 168) enables imagining *havruta* as a queer community, as one can see, for example, in Langer's narrative or Lowenthal's novel. These representations break with the imagery of the nuclear family and coupledness by turning to the traditional context of the yeshiva as a space for

communal, universal queer intimacy of shared Torah study. Hence, recuperating the queer potential of *havruta* offers a promise of an affective community and a community of shared sensibilities, one that can realize a continuum of religious, intellectual, and erotic sensibilities, supported by social structures that are available in traditional Judaism and that are unavailable elsewhere.

The works discussed here suggest a variety of models of relating of queer Jews to mainstream Jewish communities. Some, such as Brody's novel, are separationist, suggesting a possibility of a gay Jewish space only through a break with the mainstream Jewish community. Others, such as Anton's novel, prefer an integrationist model of Jewish queer life, imagining ways of co-existence between queer and mainstream Jews within shared spaces.

The modern and contemporary queer narratives of *havruta* discussed in this dissertation develop strategies of resistance to the binary discourse of Jewishness and homosexuality, which presents male same-sex desire and traditional Judaism as antagonistic. Building on the affective-phallocentric duality of the traditional Jewish texts, these works construct the relationship between mainstream Jewish community and queerness as a relationship between two classical Judaic sources: the legal material of Leviticus along with its rabbinic discussions and the narratives of David and Jonathan in the books of Samuel, often juxtaposed with the talmudic story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish (or the larger Rabbi Yohanan cycle). The queer images of *havruta* adopt the traditional binarism of the affective and phallocentric discourses, but they assign new meanings to each of the two sets of texts, or they shift the discursive lines between them. They often present the narratives of David and Jonathan or Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as ways to counter the Levitical tradition, to contest the oppressive force of the latter by means of the affirmative possibilities of the former. In contrast to mainstream traditionalist

discourses that categorize homosexuality as anti-Torah, queer Jewish narratives of study partnership re-draw the lines between the sacred and the profane, conceptualizing male same-sex sexual experiences that exist outside of Jewish religious frameworks as profane, and male same-sex sexual experiences in the context of traditional Judaism as sacred. In this way, these texts construct a new binary opposition of the profane queerness and the sacred queerness. They associate the profane queerness with the Levitical law that, in these works, correlates at once with gay cruising culture and with the homophobia of the traditionalist Jewish community. In contrast, they associate the sacred queerness, one that requires shared religiosity and shared Jewish texts/learning, with the narratives of David and Jonathan or Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish. The fictional queer *havruta* partners often express the longing to escape from the perceived social reality of the profane queerness to the imaginary image of the sacred queerness, and yet these literary works show that the phallogentric discourse of the Levitical law and the romantic, polymorphous eroticism of the affective tradition often produce and reproduce each other. This strategy of utilizing the binary discourses while redefining them, changing their meanings overlaps with a move of constructing a Jewish queer continuum that disrupts binary definitions of desire such as sexual and affective or Jewish and queer. These cultural strategies help contemporary queer subjects make Judaism intelligible for themselves, as well as to make their experience intelligible from a Jewish perspective.

Contemporary recuperation of *havruta* intimacies by LGBTQ people requires radical break from the oppressive foundations of these intimacies. At the same time, male homosocial relations provided a space for expressing same-sex feelings, otherwise repressed in the traditional Jewish context, and a space with its own unique erotic and affective possibilities. In this way, traditional Jewish culture disrupted its own norms.

This dissertation demonstrates that, while retaining the heteronormative presumption and the legal ban on male-male sexual acts, the traditional Jewish sources often include homoerotic elements that can be read through a queer lens in order to draw new meaning from the traditional texts and practices. This contemporary queer reading breaks with the intentions of the ancient study practice and with the past meanings of the traditional texts and homosocial relations. The homoerotic imagery of the traditional texts usually has figurative meanings. As this dissertation suggests, the ancient rabbis set a literary tradition of eroticized intellectualism in Jewish culture, often associating study partnership with marriage, yet this metaphorical tradition radically differs from today's sensibilities and cultural meanings. The traditional texts did not understand study partnership in sexual terms, nor did they approve of same-sex unions as we understand them today. These traditional images are, however, queerable, readable as queer by those able to do so, and thus can function in various ways and support different Jewish cultural imaginations. The cultural project of modern writers is an effort to transform these traditional metaphors into new images that speak to their readers, to their cultural assumptions and their life experience.

This dissertation focuses on cultural imaginations of the texts in question, and on the effects of these imaginations for today's queer Jews, rather than on their historical accuracy or on representation of social reality. While doing so, it calls for attention to differences between historical and cultural contexts. As well, one should be aware of the complexity of the constructions of homosocial relationships in the so-called pre-sexuality periods, especially in pre-modern formations, bearing in mind their cultural specificity and variability. A claim that could be made is that, regardless of the intentions of the authors in the context of production, the homoerotic meanings are implicit in these traditional images and that these images lend themselves to a queer reading from a modern subject-position, in the context of reception.

Some Jewish narratives of study partnership utilize the patriarchal exchange of women as the key organizing element of the storyline, such as the arranged marriages in the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsia 84a or in An-sky's *Dybbuk*. Some others, such as the works of Agnon, Singer, or Anton, represent images of abandoned wives of Torah scholars. The queer potential of Jewish homosociality, however, can be expanded beyond its androcentric context, and it could be applied to queer women or trans people. For instance, Rachel Rafael Neis offers a reading of the talmudic tale in b.Bava Metsia 84a that disrupts the androcentric views of rabbinic study partnership (*When* 162-167). Literary and artistic examples mentioned in this dissertation include Isaac Bashevis Singer's short stories "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," "Zeitl and Rickel," and "Androgynous" or Tobaron Waxman's work of visual-performing art *Self-portrait as pshat*. These works imagine non-androcentric, queer intimacies of traditional *havruta*. The focus on homoeroticism, whether male or female, in the traditional texts can reinforce cisnormativity and gender binary (Neis, *When* 162, 171). Many literary texts, however, traditional and modern alike, such as the Rabbi Yohanan Cycle in Bava Metsia 84a or I.B. Singer's stories, show complexity, multiplicity, and fluidity of desires enabled by the context of study partnership that transcend the normative gender binarism and the presumption of cisness.

The *havruta* intimacy can be understood in a larger context of homosocial spaces and their homoerotic aspects, including the eroticism of learning, which is not unique to *havruta* or yeshiva, nor to larger Jewish contexts, nor to religious contexts as such. In addition to the theme of *havruta*, the literary texts that I discuss in this dissertation point to a larger homosocial setting of the yeshiva, similar to other types of homoerotic bonding of male fraternities in traditional Judaism, such as in kabbalistic groups or in Hassidic communities (see Wolfson 388). There are other Jewish and non-Jewish expressions of non-phallogocentric intellectual and spiritual models of

same-sex desire outside of the yeshiva. Jay Michaelson draws attention to the homoeroticism of other traditionalist Jewish spaces such as summer camps, ritual bathhouses, and holiday celebrations. For instance, Michaelson describes the “homoerotic culture of Hasidism,” “a rich, queer eroticism” found in traditionalist Jewish religious communities in modern Israel, homoeroticism “so thoroughly embedded into the culture there that there was nothing unusual about it” (“Hasidism”). The homoeroticism of homosocial relationships in pre-modern Western societies was also associated with the universalizing notion of same-sex desire. For example, the sixth-century Rule of St. Benedict, a foundational document of Western Christian monasticism, regarded male same-sex relations to be universal by prohibiting younger monks to share a bed or have beds beside each other, or to sleep naked (Chapter 22. “How the Monks Are to Sleep”). See also works on Christian religious homoeroticism in female and male homosocial contexts (Roden).

There is a danger of anachronistic reading in categorizing some of the biblical or rabbinic traditions as normative and some as transgressive. Indeed, as many critical works demonstrate (Pardes; Lefkovitz; Boyarin; Labovitz; Strassfeld: Lev), these texts do not always align with the arrangements of sex and gender roles that are conventional in their cultures and thus they can be characterized as transgressive. Generally, however, the homoerotic moments that one can identify in the traditional texts might not be necessarily queer in a sense of transgression to the authors and their pre-modern readers. Quite often, these images were normative in the culture of their production. Likewise, the intimate bonds between men in traditional homosocial structures, as homoerotic as they could be, were quite normative. This intimacy was socially approved, it was expected and praised, and, as this dissertation demonstrates, it was prescribed and institutionalized in the form of study partnership.

The normativity of the homosocial *havruta* intimacy in traditional Jewish sources is predicated upon their heteronormativity and on the presumption of the non-sexual character of such relationships based on the prohibition of sex between men in the Jewish religious law derived from the Book of Leviticus. Although the traditional eroticism of Torah study in its male homosocial context has a homoerotic character, it is typically expressed in heterosexual terms. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation, rabbinic traditions often imagined the Torah as the metaphorical female lover of male Torah scholars. Jewish critical scholarship has noted the desexualized eros of the homosocial homoeroticism of Jewish intellectual life, rabbinic or medieval (Adler; Wolfson).²²⁵ As such, the homoerotic possibilities of *havruta* are predicated upon the invisibility or erasure of same-sex desires and practices, and on a limited, non-sexual eroticism. Contemporary Jewish writers discussed in this dissertation make the theme of homoerotism explicit, using the images of male biblical heroes or talmudic rabbis instead of normative heterosexual imagery. They also imagine realization of this homoeroticism by depicting sexual practices between study partners. Nevertheless, the narratives of desire and intimacy in the modern texts discussed in this dissertation are also narratives of rejection and repression, failure and despair. Modern queer reading, which affirms the body, presents a radical discontinuity with the traditional Jewish world, where possibilities of same-sex eroticism in the experience of Torah study are predicated on abrogation and sublimation of

²²⁵ Wolfson's work shows, in relation to the homosocial fraternities of medieval Jewish mystics, that "spiritual devotion and carnal fervor were not polar opposites but two facets of eros" and that "intense religious experience of ascetic eroticism, dependent on renunciation of carnal eros, is a phenomenon of sexual desire more generally" (297, 332). Similarly, in other homosocial environments, Jewish and non-Jewish, such as medieval mystical circles, monasteries, Hasidic courts, youth movements, the military, or sports, the homoeroticism of the homosocial bonds presumed their non-sexual character based on heteronormativity and often, in modern contexts, homophobia. See, for example, Ofer Nordheimer Nur's book on Zionist "erotic communities" within Hashomer Hatzair youth movement in the 1920s, which advocated "sublimation of libido through work" (63).

physical sexuality.²²⁶ And yet, the traditional sources, too, sometimes show an awareness of a transgressive sexual energy present in studying with a partner. This is evident in the anxieties that the ancient rabbis articulated around the idea of female scholars studying with men or in the rabbinic accounts of sex between male students (see Chapter Three of this dissertation). Hence, as this dissertation demonstrates, this presumed and prescribed lack of sexual motive did not necessarily exclude sexual desire or physical and emotional intimacy. Rather, it points to a specific form of heteronormativity (and related homoeroticism) that differentiates between phallocentric and affective discourses of same-sex relationships discussed earlier. The traditional images of study partnership as a committed union of two men, which includes emotional intimacy and sometimes erotic attraction, should be understood in light of the larger distinction between the sexual and the affective that characterize cultures where the modern Western category of sexuality is absent. As Chapter Three of this dissertation demonstrates, the images of scholarly couples such as Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish employ the homoerotic potential of the homosocial structures to emphasize the emotional closeness between male partners similar to the images of heroic couples such as David and Jonathan. It is also helpful to locate these biblical and rabbinic narratives in the larger cultural context of antiquity and to compare them with the images of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh or of Achilles and Patroclus in the Iliad, as well as with the images of Athenian pederastic relationships. As such, looking for evidence of sex, genital acts or intercourse in the traditional texts that depict homosocial relationships is not helpful in understanding these relationships. This approach superimposes categories of later periods upon these texts, ignoring their historical and cultural specificity.

²²⁶ According to Jean Laplanche, the process of desexualization in sublimation is never complete. The sexual desire is transformed, rather than displaced (as Freud termed it in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*): “[T]he sexual origin of the drive continues to influence the new, sublimated form” (Laplanche 119-20).

Images that might be non-sexual or non-erotic in the classical texts can become sexual or erotic in their modern reception, and vice versa. Rather than searching for evidence of genital activity in traditional Jewish settings and texts, this dissertation explores the ways in which Jewish queer culture makers read a queer valence, a “powerful yet elusive queer kernel” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 14, 15, 40) that is already present within Jewish intellectual life in its traditional form—potentially or in actuality of some experiences, and imaginatively, as a rhetorical trope in some modes of literature.

As Chapter Four of this dissertation demonstrates, reclaiming *havruta* intimacy in modern and contemporary writings disrupts easy definitions of sexuality by drawing attention to the simultaneous normativity and queerness of this intimacy, to a double dynamic that involves intersection of viewpoints and unique signifiers. The owners of the “OrthoGays Email List” on *orthogays.com* note that, “as anyone who has learned in a yeshiva, or like environment knows, passionate arguments can be both fun and fulfilling, and, for that matter, a little homoerotic.” In this quotation, the passion of the intellectual arguments over Jewish texts is at the same time homoerotic passion—not because of its association with a sexual act and related pleasures, but because of its emotional pleasure, its possibility of “both fun and fulfilment.” Obviously, not all pleasure, nor all passionate intellectual engagement is necessarily erotic. A certain type of queer sensibility, from a particular Jewish queer positionality, is required to make the intellectual, argumentative pleasure of yeshiva learning homoerotic. The presence of this queer component and its ability to signify depends on the positionality of the reader, on the existence of a feeling which may only exist to the one feeling it. In the *havruta* images, one may be in the midst of a queer experience and the other may not. In a way, the potential queer experience of *havruta* also

depends on disclosure of the other's experience. The effects of this disclosure would depend on how multi-dimensional in significance the affective bonds of *havruta* are in any given instance.

The past relations or sensations cannot be recreated because the social, cultural, historical context has changed, but they can be productive in terms of inciting new pleasures and feelings in contemporary queer contexts, similar to how Foucault describes proliferation of sexual discourses "before homosexuality" (*History* 11-13 and elsewhere). The homoerotic relations of traditional *havruta* are not inclusive, yet in spite of this they contain queer elements that can be recuperated as a critique of heteronormativity and as a new way of thinking about queer spaces today. As such, the turn to the traditional Jewish homosocial relations can be both oppressive and subversive. It may reproduce aspects of patriarchal relations in which these relations are rooted but can also challenge them and perform them differently.

5.2 What This Dissertation Does: Contribution to the Field

This dissertation participates in a broader conversation within the fields of Jewish studies, religious studies, and gender and sexuality studies, contributing to the discourse of inclusion in the humanities. By exploring the dialogical character of *havruta*, it helps in understanding the relationships between educational and hermeneutical models, on the one hand, and gender, sexual, erotic, and affective structures, on the other hand. It also helps in better understanding the intersections of subjectivity, family, and community, as well as cultural constructions of sexual and erotic meanings through literary texts. As Gayatri Spivak points out in her writings on education in the humanities, by teaching us to learn from the singular and the unverifiable, literature as storytelling and as aesthetic education helps change mindsets. It can create virtual communities; it can empower, give voice to those whose voices had been silenced, and it helps re-imagine the planet, becoming an instrument for implementing global justice and democracy

(*Aesthetic*; “Speaking” 5). In this sense, the study of queer *havruta* helps in exploring new possibilities of relational and dialogical models in today’s world where interhuman encounters tend to decrease or change substantially.

This dissertation bridges two academic cultures, the study of religion and the study of sexuality, hoping to facilitate further conversations between these fields. It provides an insight into the ways religious structures can contribute to the contemporary understanding of human sexuality. It addresses the intersections of major social issues such as gender and sexuality, queer religiosity and secularity, minorities and mainstream culture, marginalization and inclusion. It contributes to the better understanding of the intersections of religious, ethnocultural, and queer studies.

This dissertation contributes to the field of sexuality studies by drawing attention to the practice of study partnership as an important source for queer scholarship, based on the homosocial settings of *havruta* in traditional Jewish communities and on the imagery of *havruta* as competing with or analogical to marriage, the imagery that is persistent in traditional Jewish texts. The model of long-term studying in pairs presents a unique example of exploring the intersections of religion, education, hermeneutics, ethics, and gender and sexual dynamics. While exploring the intersections between gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and national and religious affiliation through analyzing literary and cultural representations of today’s Jewish queer male experience, this dissertation attempts to identify and critically examine the possibilities and the limits of the larger cultural transformations that modern Jewish queer literature might produce through reworkings of traditional images and structures (see the previous section). It allows us to examine the cultural and social effects of the texts in question, their functions within a larger

socio-cultural system of practices, and the discourses they represent, reproduce, or construct.²²⁷

By exploring diverse forms of relating and pleasure, this dissertation also contributes to the field of critical relationality (see Tallbear and Willey; Hamilton).

This dissertation contributes to the field of Jewish studies, Jewish queer studies in particular, as well as to the larger discipline of religious studies, by inquiring into the kinds of literary lineage that informs contemporary Jewish queer culture. It helps for understanding the ways in which the homoerotic possibilities of traditional Judaism inform, shape, disrupt, or constrain contemporary Jewish queer masculinities, sexual and religious identities, and forms of experience; for understanding what kinds of sexual, erotic, and affective possibilities these traditional structures offer, often when read against the grain, to the present-day queer communities and Jewish communities alike; and to what kind of continuities and discontinuities these representations point. The text model of desire and intimacy that *havruta* offers contributes to the existing scholarship on the multiplicity of Jewish models of homoeroticism and queerness. This dissertation looks at the concept of *havruta* as a case study that exemplifies the ways Jewish culture imagines intimate relationships between men and same-sex intimacies more generally. It discusses selected texts as examples of contemporary Jewish queer cultural imaginations. It examines the role of traditional *havruta* in the construction of the modern image of the queer Jew, in a creative dialogue between traditional and modern Jewish texts.

The queer images of *havruta* in the Jewish texts discussed here contribute to building Jewish queer archives that shape the collective memory of queer Jews. Through the association of same-sex desire with Torah study, queer images of *havruta* situate this desire at the very heart of

²²⁷ For that reason, the distinction between high and low art and the question of the artistic value of the sources (which is often subjective) is less relevant for my study than the cultural discourses that these works represent and produce.

Jewish religion and culture, helping in the construction of a distinctively Jewish queer culture. The classical Jewish texts traditionally constituted the core subjects of *havruta* study. The engagement with biblical and rabbinic texts was the primary purpose of *havruta*. In this sense, *havruta* historically represented a high cultural value in Judaism, as a common way of fulfilling the life-long religious obligation of Torah study, the *mitzvah* of *talmud torah*. This fact places queer images of *havruta* in a unique position in Jewish cultural imaginations. As a major traditional model of studying Jewish religious texts, typically within the settings of the yeshiva, study hall (*beit midrash*), or home, *havruta* allows the investigation of multiple opportunities of the erotic and affective relationships within traditional Jewish life.

Havruta is a practice that has been widely used in traditionalist and liberal Jewish settings alike, being a popular method of studying Jewish texts across denominations. In this way, the concept of *havruta* is familiar to the entire spectrum of Jewish communities and has the potential of transforming a wide range of Jewish spaces. As a cross-denominational practice, *havruta* differs from other homosocial structures developed in Jewish tradition that are not practiced outside a specific movement, such as the Hassidic *tish* or *farbrengen* (forms of group religious experience, usually facilitated by a spiritual leader, the Rebbe, that typically include shared meals, storytelling, singing, and discussion of Hassidic texts or concepts). In modern egalitarian Jewish settings, *havruta*, no longer restricted to a specific gender arrangement or to a specific study subject, often involves non-homosocial, cross-sex relationships, as well as an engagement with modern texts, both religious and secular. These new developments allow applying the queer images of *havruta* to a larger matrix of gender and sexual arrangements.

As a historic signifier of Jewish masculinity that is traditionally associated with scholarliness, *havruta* is also a major site of, often subversive, gender performance that involves an association

between eroticized Jewish intellectual pursuits and the eroticized Jewish male body. My focus on the representation of male same-sex desires and practices, often in relation to female or trans experiences, allows me to explore the complexity of Jewish queer masculinities and thus contributes to gender studies and masculinity studies.

This dissertation also contributes to the field of religious studies beyond Jewish studies by raising broader questions of the relationship between religion, gender, and sexuality, traditional religious images and queer existence, normativity and transgression.

5.3 What This Dissertation Does Not Do: Some New Research Directions

Some of the important trajectories of the queer *havruta* images in contemporary literature that remain outside of the scope of this dissertation could be found in *havruta*-like queer narratives. These Jewish texts do not explicitly refer to *havruta* or yeshiva, yet they represent the conflation of study and desire in a way that shows close connections to the works discussed in this dissertation. In works of fiction such as Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1992), Aryeh Lev Stollman's novel *The Far Euphrates* (1997), or André Aciman novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), intellectual activity is predicated upon same-sex desire, and both represent a form of religious experience where Jewish texts and queer intimacies are intertwined. These works could be included in an expanded literary genealogy of queer *havruta*—a project that deserves a separate study.

This dissertation mostly discusses queer *havruta* images in the relationship between selected rabbinic traditions and modern or contemporary Jewish works of fiction. The scope of this dissertation is limited to the use of certain rabbinic texts in some literary works of the past several decades. I touch upon biblical, medieval, and early modern sources occasionally, but I leave most of them outside of the scope of this dissertation. Further exploration of Jewish

homoerotic intellectualism also requires studies that would focus on the biblical, medieval, or early modern texts. For instance, the literature of Jewish mysticism in the medieval period or Hassidism in the modern age merges queer desire with Jewish religious experience, theological or metaphysical ideas, and biblical exegesis (Wolfson; Magid; Halper). Separate types of research, with different lines of inquiry, are needed to explore these sources' historical contexts and interpretive traditions, as well as their relationships to the ancient texts and to today's Jewish culture.

Whereas this dissertation primarily looks at modern and contemporary works of fiction produced in the United States and Canada (with some exceptions such as the works of Agnon and Langer), it is also necessary to examine in greater detail the modern literary landscapes of Israeli, European, and Latin American countries, among others. This undertaking also calls for a discussion of queer *havruta* representations in visual art (for instance, in the works of Benyamin Reich, Adi Nes, Lea Golda Holterman, Oscar Wolfman, Felix D'Eon, Sarah Rosen, Duncan Pflaster), performing art (such as Tobaron Waxman's works), and film (for example, Haim Tabakman's *Eyes Wide Open*; Chaim Elbaum's *And Thou Shalt Love/Ve'ahavta*; Nadav Mishali's *Barely in Love*; Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name*; Judith Prays's and Samuel Hayes's *Lonely at the Top: A Bromance*; or Alon Zingman's *Shtisel*). A discussion of queer images of *havruta* in other cultural productions such as film and visual art, however, goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, especially taking into consideration differences between textual and visual media in terms of their signifiers, possibilities, and limitations in expressing queer sensibilities. I discuss examples of queer *havruta* images in Jewish visual art in my article "Bodily Citationality and Hermeneutical Sex: Jewish Texts, Images, and Rituals as Tools for Queer Intimacies" (*Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, vol. 48, no.1, 2021, pp. 41-61).

While this dissertation focuses on male images, separate projects are needed for exploring female and trans representations in queer *havruta* cultural productions. The applications of my study to female, trans, intersex, or gender non-binary intimacies would be crucial in contributing to our understanding of Jewish queer culture and life. These would, however, require separate studies that would use different methodologies and would explore different histories of Jewish queerness. There is also a need of inquiry into the queer *havruta* in the contexts of race, class, migration, and multiculturalism, beyond Ashkenazic and Euro-American Jewish communities. More research is needed on the images of queer *havruta* as a site of relations between queer Jews and mainstream Jewish communities, as well as on the erotics of Jewish male body..

A study of queer *havruta* is a desideratum in the field of education. As a topic for separate research, one of the queer potentials of *havruta* is that it might allow one to further develop Freud's concept of sublimation as displacement of the sexual, or desexualisation. Another possible venue of study is the impact of online learning on the trope of queer *havruta*.

This dissertation can also help understand broader, non-Jewish modes of queer intimacies in today's religious communities or in Western society at large. For example, it would be interesting to compare *havruta* to the concepts of *eros* and *agape* in early Christianity or the friendship of monks. An in-depth analysis of these issues is, again, beyond the scope of this study.

Separate research is required to inquire into the ways other religious traditions address and reflect upon the questions that this dissertation explores. For example, the shift in Jewish critical scholarship since the 1990s away from an assumption of an inherent conflict between religion and homosexuality toward recognizing the varieties of heteronormativity, homoerotic discourses, and narratives of queerness is not just a Jewish conversation, it is also reflected in discussions of

religion, gender, and sexuality across religious traditions. This dissertation mentions some of the works in Christian critical biblical scholarship on these subjects. Likewise, the duality of some traditional religious practices as sites of normativity and queerness at once is not unique to Judaism. Investigation of practices in other religious traditions that are in some ways similar to *havruta* is a subject of future studies.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Aggadah (Heb. “story”; pl. ***aggadot***): Non-legal rabbinic material that includes biblical commentaries (*midrash aggadah*), tales about the rabbis, and other narratives found in the Talmud and Midrash.

Amoraim: The ancient rabbis of the Gemara period (the third-fifth centuries CE).

Arba kanfot (Heb. “four corners”; ***arba kanfos*** in Yiddish and in Ashkenazic Hebrew): the ritual undergarment with fringes on the corners. A synonym for *tallit katan* or *tzitzit*.

Ashkenazic: Referring to the descendants of the Jews from Germany and North France (the region traditionally called Ashkenaz in Hebrew sources) who also settled in Eastern Europe.

Basherter (Yiddish): Soulmate, intended partner, beloved.

Beit Din: Rabbinic court.

Beit Midrash: Study Hall.

Da’at: Knowledge.

Derash: A method of Jewish biblical interpretation that focuses on the derived, or applied meaning of the text (as opposed to plain meaning, *peshat*).

Dibbuk haverim (Heb. “attachment of friends/study partners”): A rabbinic term for prescribed closeness between friends in the context of shared Torah study.

Edelkayt (Yiddish “gentleness” or “delicacy”): An expected quality of the ideal yeshiva student or a pious Jew in Ashkenazic communities.

Erastes and ***Eromenos*** (Greek “the lover” and “the beloved”): Partners in the ancient Athenian pederastic relationships.

Gemara: The Amoraic discussions of the Mishnah that constitute the Talmud.

Geonic: Referring to the Gaons, the heads of the Babylonian rabbinic academies in the post-Talmudic period.

Halakhah: Jewish religious law, rabbinic legal material found in the Talmud and Midrash.

Haredi: Ultra-Orthodox Jews residing in modern State of Israel.

Hasidism: A pietist movement in traditional Judaism originated in the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe, characterized by close attachments between a religious leader (**Rebbe**) and his followers (**Hasidim**; sing. **Hasid**).

Haskalah: Jewish Enlightenment, a rationalist, secularizing, and modernizing movement in the nineteenth-century European Jewish communities.

Haver: A rabbinic term that referred to a friend, a companion, a fellow, a scholar, or a study partner.

Havruta: 1. Long term study partnership, a dominant method of studying in the yeshiva. 2. A pair of yeshiva students studying Torah together. 3. A study partner.

Heteronormativity: An assumption that cross-gender sexual and romantic relationships are normative or exclusively acceptable.

Homonormativity: An assumption that same-sex relationships must resemble traditional heterosexual marriages.

Homosexuality: A medical term of the late nineteenth-early twentieth century psychiatry that identified and categorized same-sex sexual or romantic feelings as pathological.

Homosociality: Exclusive socialization of persons of the same gender in a gender-segregated society, typically in specific settings such as military, educational, or domestic.

***Illui*:** A Talmudic genius.

Kabbalah: A branch of medieval Jewish mysticism.

***Kolel*:** Talmudic academy for married men (as opposed to **yeshiva**, an educational institution for unmarried men).

LGBTQ: Abbreviation of “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer,” a term that refers to non-normative sexual and gender identities or related activism.

Loshn koydesh (Yiddish “the sacred tongue”; Heb. ***lashon ha-kodesh***): A term that refers to Hebrew-Aramaic language of the religious Jewish texts.

Mame loshn (Yiddish “Mama’s tongue”): A term that refers to Yiddish.

Maskilic: Referring to ***Haskalah***, Jewish Enlightenment.

Midrash (pl. ***midrashim***; Hebrew “interpretation,” “inquiry,” or “study”): A rabbinic genre of commentary to the Hebrew Bible through re-writing biblical narratives, filling the gaps, expanding storylines, adding details or dialogues, and re-imagining biblical characters to address the rabbis’ own realities and concerns, often by using popular myths or common literary patterns. Midrashim are found throughout the Talmud or in special midrashic collections.

***Mikveh*:** Ritual bathhouse intended primarily for women’s preparation for marital relations after a menstruation cycle or sometimes for men’s preparation for prayer or Torah study.

Minyan: A quorum required for Jewish communal prayer.

Mishkav zakhur (Heb. “male lying down”): A rabbinic term for male-male sexual intercourse, used in Jewish legal literature since the Talmud onward.

Mishkevei ishah (Heb. the “lyings down of woman”): A biblical term for male-male sexual intercourse, found in Lev. 18 and 20.

Mishnah: The early redaction of the rabbinic traditions during the Tannaitic period (the second-third centuries CE). Following the conventions of scholarship in rabbinics, I use the upperscase “Mishnah” when referring to this corpus of literature as a whole and the lowercase “mishnah” when referring to a single item within this corpus.

Misnagdic (**Mitnagdic** in Modern Hebrew): Referring to *mitnagdim*, the opponents of Hasidism within Orthodox Jewish communities of Eastern Europe in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.

Nazirite (Heb. *Nazir*): In the Hebrew Bible, a man who made an oath (usually temporary) not to cut his hair, not to drink wine, and not to touch dead bodies, as a symbol of a special commitment to God.

Nazirut: The state of being a Nazirite.

‘Onah: Prescribed sexual intercourse between spouses.

Oral Torah: The rabbinic traditions (the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the consequent legal tradition), as opposed to the Hebrew Bible (“The Written Torah”).

Pederasty: Erotic mentorship, a social institution in ancient Athens, a formal relationship between two males, a younger *eromenos* and an older *erastes*, that typically included sexual and educational components.

Pentateuch: The first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

***Peshat*:** A traditional Jewish method of biblical interpretation, explication of the plain meaning of the text (as opposed to derived, or applied meaning, *derash*).

Phallogocentric: Related to an assumption that sexual acts necessarily constitute phallic penetration or that the latter is the goal of every sexual activity.

***Pilpul*:** A number of methods of talmudic study and exposition that were popular in the sixteenth-century yeshivot in Poland.

Polymorphous eroticism: Related to a variety of sexual acts and desires, not necessarily centered on phallic penetration or genital contact.

Rabbinic: Related to the post-biblical period, to the activity of the rabbis of late antiquity.

Rebbe: The leader of a Hassidic group.

Shabbat: The Sabbath, the seventh day of the Hebrew calendar, the day of rest.

***Shekhinah*:** Divine Presence, the feminine manifestation of God according to rabbinic literature.

Shtetl: A small town in Eastern Europe with predominantly Jewish population, which existed from medieval period until the Holocaust.

Stammaim: The anonymous redactors of the Babylonian Talmud.

Tallit (or *tallis* in Yiddish and Ashkenazic Hebrew): Prayer shawl.

Tallit katan: “Small *tallit*,” ritual undergarment. A synonym of *arba kanfot* or *tzitzit*.

Talmud: The major corpus of rabbinic literature, produced in late antiquity.

Talmud torah: “Torah study,” a positive commandment formulated by the ancient rabbis that was perceived as the highest religious value in rabbinic culture.

Tanakh: The Hebrew Bible.

Tannaim: The ancient rabbis of the Mishnah period (the second-third centuries CE).

Torah (“Teaching”): 1. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Pentateuch). 2. The Jewish biblical canon (the Tanakh). 3. The entire Jewish religious tradition and Jewish religious literature.

Torah lishmah: The ideal of Torah study “for its own sake.”

Tosafists: A medieval school of Jewish biblical and talmudic interpretation in Germany and Northern France.

Tosefta: A legal corpus of Tannaitic literature that contained traditions not included in the Mishnah.

Tzitzit: 1. Ritual fringes attached to one’s clothes. 2. Ritual undergarment, a synonym of *arba kanfot* or *tallit katan*.

Wissenschaft des Judentums (German “the science of Judaism”): The nineteenth-century movement among German Jewish intellectuals for critical historical studies of Judaism.

Written Torah: The Hebrew Bible (as opposed to “Oral Torah,” the rabbinic traditions).

Yeshiva: Jewish religious educational institution, traditionally reserved for unmarried men.

Yeshivah Bokhur: Yeshiva student.

Yeshivah shel ma'alah (Heb. “the yeshiva of Heaven,” lit. “the yeshiva above”): The ancient rabbinic concept of heavenly academy, where the souls of rabbis study the Torah with God and the angels, which was thought to correspond to the ancient rabbinic academies on earth.

Yetser hara (Heb. “the evil inclination”): A rabbinic term for transgressive desires, generally for bodily pleasures, including sexual desire, as opposed to *yetser tov* (the “good inclination”), the desire for Torah study and for worship of God.

Zoharic: Related to the Zohar, a major corpus of medieval Jewish mystical literature written as a commentary to the Bible.

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APPENDIX: Semantic Range of אהב (“Love”) in the Hebrew Bible

The ancient rabbis, the Tannaim and the Amoraim, typically relied on the biblical meanings of “love” in their discussions or re-writings of the biblical narratives. Hebrew Bible concordances (BDB 12-13 and Even-Shoshan 19-20) show a wide range of meanings of the root ‘*a.h.v.* (*Aleph. Heh. Vet.*). By focusing on the root ‘*a.h.v.* and for reasons of space, I leave out a discussion of related vocabulary in Biblical Hebrew, which would be a separate project.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I would group the usages of ‘*a.h.v.* in Biblical Hebrew by four major semantic categories (without delving into a discussion of the primary and derivative meanings, hence the order in this list is random):

1. Family and society, with main meanings of “attachment,” “commitment,” and “loyalty” (love of son or mother-in-law; love of neighbour, stranger, friend; love of slave for master, inferior for superior).
2. Everyday life, with main meanings of “habits,” “preferences,” and “interests” (love of food, drink, sleep; love of wisdom or knowledge).
3. Religious devotion, with main meanings of “piety,” “worship,” “ritual observance” (love of God, Jerusalem, righteousness, God’s love for Israel or individual men; love of idolatry).
4. Human sexuality (using modern terminology), with main meanings of “sexual desire,” “passion,” “infatuation,” “affection,” and/or “attachment/commitment” (see examples below).

Some of the groups above can overlap, for instance, the meanings of political loyalty, religious loyalty, family commitment, and romantic attachment are often used in the Hebrew Bible interchangeably or simultaneously, with one as a metaphor for another or as a play on multiple meanings of ‘*ahavah*, often used as a literary device. The semantic parallels between religious devotion and sexual desire form the basis of the prophetic marriage metaphor in Hosea

1-3, Jeremiah 2-4, and Ezekiel 16 and 23 that construe Israel's relationship with God and alleged idolatry in sexual terms, as marriage and adultery. The narratives of David and Jonathan in 1 Sam. 18-20, 23 and 2 Sam. 1 exemplify the overlap of the meanings of *'ahavah* as political loyalty, personal friendship, and romantic attachment, affection, and commitment, with the motif of "love of heroes" (and the language of desire that accompanies it) supporting the claim of Jonathan's political loyalty to David central to the David apologists who composed this legend (or its final version).

Erotic/Affective Love

The semantic group related to human sexuality, which is the most relevant to this dissertation, primarily includes the meanings of "sexual desire" and "affection." The semantic range of *'a.h.v.* in this category includes both the phallocentric and the affective usages, sometimes separately and sometimes simultaneously. The examples in this category could be divided by the modern category of object-choice: (a) men's love for women; (b) women's love for men; (c) love between men; and (d) love between women.

Men's Love for Women

Most examples in the Hebrew Bible refer to men's love of women, such as Isaac's love for Rebecca (Gen. 24.67) or Jacob's love for Rachel (Gen. 29.18-30). In Genesis 29, Jacob loved (or "fell in love with") Rachel because she was "shapely and beautiful" (Gen. 29.17-18), therefore "Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her" (Gen. 29.20). This strong and lasting love is grounded in physical attraction (to Rachel's beauty) and sexual desire: "Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled, that I may cohabit with her'" (Gen. 29.21). One also learns that "Samson fell in love with a

woman in the Wadi Sorek, named Delilah” (Judges 16.4), which follows by an account of Samson’s sexual relationship with Delilah. Elkanah loved his wife Hannah yet was distressed because of her infertility (1 Sam. 1.4). King Solomon “loved many foreign women in addition to Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Phoenician, and Hittite women [...] Such Solomon clung to and loved [lit. “to them Solomon clung in love”] (1 Kings 11.1-2). The language of “clinging” to his “seven hundred royal wives and three hundred concubines” (1 Kings 11.3) alludes to Adam’s “clinging” to Eve to become “one flesh” with her in Genesis 2: “Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh” (Gen. 2.24). The Book of Proverbs associates love of wife with infatuation and sexual satisfaction: “Find joy in the wife of your youth— A loving doe, a graceful mountain goat. Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be infatuated with love of her always” (Prov. 5.18-19). Ecclesiastes includes love of a woman along with other pleasures of life, such as bread, wine, fine clothes, and ointments (Eccl. 9.7-8) that can make a man happy: “Enjoy happiness [lit. “see life”] with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun” (Eccl. 9.9). After Esther “was taken to King, in his royal palace” (Esther 2.16), Ahasuerus “loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti” (Esther 2.17).

Most of the examples above reference a man’s desire for a woman without mentioning whether it was mutual. The context usually suggests that it was not. The future matriarchs did not have a say in their arranged marriages nor did Esther when she was taken to the king’s palace (harem). Rachel’s and Leah’s competition to spend nights with Jacob is motivated by their

efforts to have more children and thus affirm their status according to their social norms, not by their sexual desire or love for Jacob, which the text never mentions. Esther uses Ahasuerus's desire ("love") for her to her (and her people's) advantage, yet, once again, her desire or love for him is not a concern of the narrative. The pleasures, joy, and happiness of love in Proverbs or Ecclesiastes belong exclusively to men, who "consume" women's bodies just as they consume food and drinks (which are conventional metaphors for sex and the female body in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in rabbinic literature).

The most problematic examples that take this patriarchal and androcentric logic to the extreme are the instances of the biblical use of "love" (*'ahavah*) in the context of rape—what we would definitely not call "love" today. These instances include the stories of Shechem and Dinah in Genesis 34 or Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13.²²⁸ As I discuss in Chapter Three of this dissertation, *'ahavah* of Amnon for Tamar refers to lust that leads to sexual violence (Amnon "overpowered" Tamar disregarding her protests) and turns into hatred (2 Sam. 13.1-15). The story of Dinah is more complex. On the one hand, it suggests that Shechem raped Dinah: he "saw her, and took her and lay with her and disgraced her [lit. "and violated her"]" (Gen. 34.2). On the other hand, the biblical text does not state whether Dinah consented (this allowed Anita Diamant to imagine a mutual love between Dinah and Shechem in her 1997 novel *The Red Tent*). As with other biblical passages of "love" mentioned above, the writers were not concerned with the woman's consent, which aligns with the norms of the ancient Near East (the concern in this case was that she lost her virginity and thus damaged the honour of her father and brothers). In contrast to Amnon, Shechem fell in love with Dinah after engaging in intercourse with her: "Being strongly drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in love with the maiden, he spoke to the

²²⁸ For a more detailed discussion of these stories, see Ehrlich, "Reading," 97-101.

maiden tenderly. So Shechem said to his father Hamor, ‘Get me this girl as a wife’” (Gen. 34.3-4). The depiction how lust transforms into “love” in this text suggests a different understanding of *‘ahavah*, which is still associated with sexual desire but transcends exclusively physical attraction.

Women’s Love for Men

Two references to a woman’s love for a man, Michal’s love for David in 1 Sam. 18 and the female lover’s voice in the Song of Songs, are the only such instances in the Hebrew Bible. The other two instances, woman’s desire for her husband as God’s curse of Eve in Genesis 3 and the desire of Potiphar’s wife for Joseph in Genesis 39, use wording that does not include the root *‘a.h.v.*: “Yet your urge [*teshukatekh*] shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3.16); “Now Joseph was well built and handsome. After a time, his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph [*va-tisa’ ... et eyneha el yosef*] and said, ‘Lie with me’” (Gen. 39.6-7).

Michal’s love for David parallels Jonathan’s love for him. It includes unconditional commitment and support (see my discussion in Chapter Three of this dissertation and later in this Appendix): “Now Michal daughter of Saul had fallen in love with David” (1 Sam. 18.20); “When Saul realized that the Lord was with David and that Michal daughter of Saul loved him” (1 Sam. 18.28). The text suggests that the love of Saul’s daughter for David is a sign that David is chosen by God (“the Lord was with David”). The narrative does not state whether that love is mutual; nevertheless, it leads to David’s marriage to Michal: “So Saul said to David, ‘You can become my son-in-law even now through the second one’” (1 Sam. 18.21). Michal helps David escape when Saul plans to kill him (so does Jonathan later in the narrative, see 1 Sam 20.35-42):

Saul sent messengers to David's home to keep watch on him and to kill him in the morning. But David's wife Michal told him, "Unless you run for your life tonight, you will be killed tomorrow." Michal let David down from the window and he escaped and fled. Michal then took the household idol, laid it on the bed, and covered it with a cloth; and at its head she put a net of goat's hair. Saul sent messengers to seize David; but she said, "He is sick." Saul, however, sent back the messengers to see David for themselves. "Bring him up to me in the bed," he ordered, "that he may be put to death." When the messengers came, they found the household idol in the bed, with the net of goat's hair at its head. Saul said to Michal, "Why did you play that trick on me and let my enemy get away safely?" "Because," Michal answered Saul, "he said to me: 'Help me get away or I'll kill you'." (1 Sam. 19.11-17)

In this episode, Michal acts out of love for David, her husband, and yet she does not admit it to her father, King Saul. Michal's image as a trickster here alludes to the stories of the matriarchs in Genesis or Esther—a literary pattern of portrayal women exercising their power in indirect ways, by tricking men, their fathers or husbands. A similar situation in 1 Samuel 20, when Jonathan defends David and helps him escape, is depicted differently—Jonathan confronts his father:

But Jonathan spoke up and said to his father, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" At that, Saul threw his spear at him to strike him down; and Jonathan realized that his father was determined to do away with David. Jonathan rose from the table in a rage. He ate no food on the second day of the new moon, because he was grieved about David, and because his father had humiliated him. (1 Sam. 20.32-34)

Arguably, the Song of Songs is the only biblical text that depicts mutual love between a woman and a man, seemingly outside of the dominant patriarchal norms.²²⁹ Not only the woman's voice is heard here, but the text is written from a woman's perspective and celebrates female sexuality. The woman expresses her feelings for her lover ("For I am faint with love [*holat 'ahavah*]," Song 2.5) and her longing for him ("Upon my couch at night I sought the one I love [*she 'ahavah nafshi*]," Song 3.1; "I must seek the one I love," Song 3.2), as well as other young women's love of him ("Therefore do maidens love you [*ahevukha*]," Song 1.3). She also describes her perception of the man's love for her, e.g., "And his banner of love was over me [*diglo 'alay 'ahavah*]" (Song 2.4). As well, she shares general ideas about love: "Do not wake or rouse Love [*'ahavah*] until it please!" (Song 2.7); "For love [*'ahavah*] is fierce as death" (Song 8.6); "Vast floods cannot quench love, Nor rivers drown it. If a man offered all his wealth for love, He would be laughed to scorn" (Song 8.7). The male lover in the Song of Songs, in his turn, expresses his love of the woman and admiration of her beauty. As Adler points out, the polymorphous eroticism of the Song of Songs radically diverges from the phallocentric sexual categories dominant in the Hebrew Bible ("Virgin" 138–40, 147–48). The Song of Songs also uses other terms for "love" such as *dodim*: "For your love [*dodekha*] is more delightful than wine" (Song 1.2); "Eat, lovers, and drink: Drink deep of love [*dodim*]!" (Song 5.1). *Dodim* in this text has a more sexual meaning, "lovemaking": "There I will give my love [*doday*] to you" (Song 7.13). In a related manner, the poem uses the noun "desire" (*teshukah*): "I am my beloved's, And his desire [*teshukato*] is for me" (Song 7.11; cf. the use of the same word, *teshukah*, in Gen. 3.16, referring to the woman's desire for her husband). The word '*ahavah*, "love," too, is associated with sexual desire and arousal in the Song of Songs: "Do not wake or

²²⁹ If one to disregard the references to concubines (Song 6.8–9), the woman's physical abuse by the city guards (Song 5.7), and the very fact that the woman is speaking behind a veil (Song 4.1, 3, 6.7).

rouse Love [‘*ahavah*] until it please [*ad shetehpats*, lit. “until the desire is aroused”]!” (Song 2.7, 8.4).

Love between Women

A woman’s love for another woman is only referenced in the Hebrew Bible once, in the Book of Ruth, regarding the relationship of Ruth and Naomi, her mother-in-law. When Ruth marries Boaz and gives birth to a son, the women neighbours tell Naomi: “he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you [‘*ahevatekh*] and is better to you than seven sons” (Ruth 4.15). In the context of the book, Ruth’s love for Naomi is associated with commitment and loyalty, when Ruth decides to stay with Naomi after the death of her husband. Ruth’s expression of commitment to Naomi resembles marriage: “For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts me from you” (Ruth 1.16-17).

Love between Men

The legend of David and Jonathan in 1-2 Samuel, which I discuss in this dissertation at length, exemplifies the biblical notion of love between men. The narrative presents David as the one loved by everyone: by Samuel, Saul, Michal, Jonathan, and the entire Israel, apparently, because he is loved by God (cf. the image of Joseph in Genesis). Upon seeing David, Saul “took a strong liking to him [lit. “loved him very much”] and made him one of his arms-bearers” (1 Sam. 16.14-23). Jonathan, too, falls in love with David at their first encounter and consequently performs a commitment ceremony to demonstrate his love:

When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David. Jonathan loved (*vaye'ehavehu*) David as himself [*kenafsho*, lit. "as his soul"]. Saul took him [into his service] that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Jonathan and David made a pact, because [Jonathan] loved him (*be'ahavato*) as himself [*kenafsho*, lit. "as his soul"]. Jonathan took off the cloak and tunic he was wearing and gave them to David, together with his sword, bow and belt. (1 Sam. 18.1-4)

The language of love "as one's own soul" and binding of souls suggests an affective bond, emotional attachment, or even spiritual connection, although it can also have erotic connotations as seen in the Song of Songs: "you whom I love so well [*she'ahavah nafshi*, lit. "love of my soul"]" (Song 1.7). Jonathan's gifts to David may allude to a commitment ritual that resembles marriage (or Greek pederastic rituals), but the nature of the gifts (Jonathan's royal garments and weapons) suggests a political meaning, a symbolic act of transferring power and royal authority.

David's military victories bring him growing popularity in Israel. Saul envies David and fears his competition. Saul urges his son Jonathan and all his courtiers to kill David. "But Saul's son Jonathan was very fond of David [*hafets bedavid me'od*, lit. "desired David very much"]" (1 Sam. 19.1). The root *h.f.ts.* in the Hebrew Bible often denotes sexual desire of a man for a woman, for example, "love's desire/arousal," *ad shetehpats*, in the Song of Songs 2.7 and 8.4; Shechem's desire for Dinah, "for he wanted (*hafets*) Jacob's daughter" (Gen. 34.19); or desire for a captive woman: "should you no longer want her (*im lo' hafatsta bah*)" (Deut. 21.10-14).

Further affirmations of love and commitment follow during David's and Jonathan's interactions when David is fleeing Saul's court: "Thus has Jonathan covenanted with the house of David. [...] Jonathan, out of his love for David (*be'ahavato oto*), adjured him again, for he

loved him as himself (‘*ahavat nafsho* ‘*ahavo*, lit. “[with] the love of his soul he loved him”’) (1 Sam. 20.16-17). At the time of saying farewell, “[t]hey kissed each other and wept together [...] Jonathan said to David, ‘Go in peace! For we two have sworn to each other in the name of the LORD: ‘May the LORD be [witness] between you and me, and between your offspring and mine, forever!’” (1 Sam. 20.41-42). David and Jonathan meet again, this time it is their last meeting. Jonathan finds David, who goes in hiding, to show his support and commitment:

And Saul’s son Jonathan came to David at Horesh and encouraged him in [the name of] God. He said to him, “Do not be afraid: the hand of my father Saul will never touch you. You are going to be king over Israel and I shall be second to you; and even my father Saul knows this is so.” And the two of them entered into a pact before the Lord” (1 Sam. 23.16-18).

The issue in this passage is who will be “king over Israel.” Likewise, in the previous passages Jonathan “covenanted with the house of David,” with the future Davidic dynasty, rather than with David as an individual. Similarly, the pact is “between you and me, and between your offspring and mine, forever!” “Offspring” here refers to the respective royal dynasties.

When Saul and Jonathan perish in a battle, David laments them and claims that Jonathan’s love for him had been better than the love of women: “I grieve for you, My brother Jonathan, You were most dear to me (*na’amta li me’od*, lit. “you were pleasant/delightful to me very much”). Your love [‘*ahavatkha*] was wonderful to me More than the love of women [‘*ahavat nashim*)” (2 Sam. 1.26). Soon after, however, we learn about a war between ‘the House of Saul and the House of David’: “The war between the House of Saul and the House of David was long-drawn-out; but David kept growing stronger, while the House of Saul grew weaker” (2 Sam. 3.1). This passage in 2 Samuel 3 lays out the context of the David and Jonathan story and

explains the recurrent claims of Jonathan's (the original "House of Saul") commitment and loyalty to David and to David's offspring/House. In this way, the Saul's dynasty is presented as rebellious against the legitimate, Davidic royal dynasty, as a break of the pact of loyalty, rather than the other way around. This political meaning of Jonathan's "love" for David is supported by and expressed through the affective and erotic meanings of "love" in the story, through the images of affection, infatuation, and desire resulting in emotional attachment and personal commitment that transforms into political loyalty. The writers or redactors of this narrative thus utilize the semantic range of love, *'ahavah*, as a literary device that serves their goals.